

Plains City & Cactus Crossing

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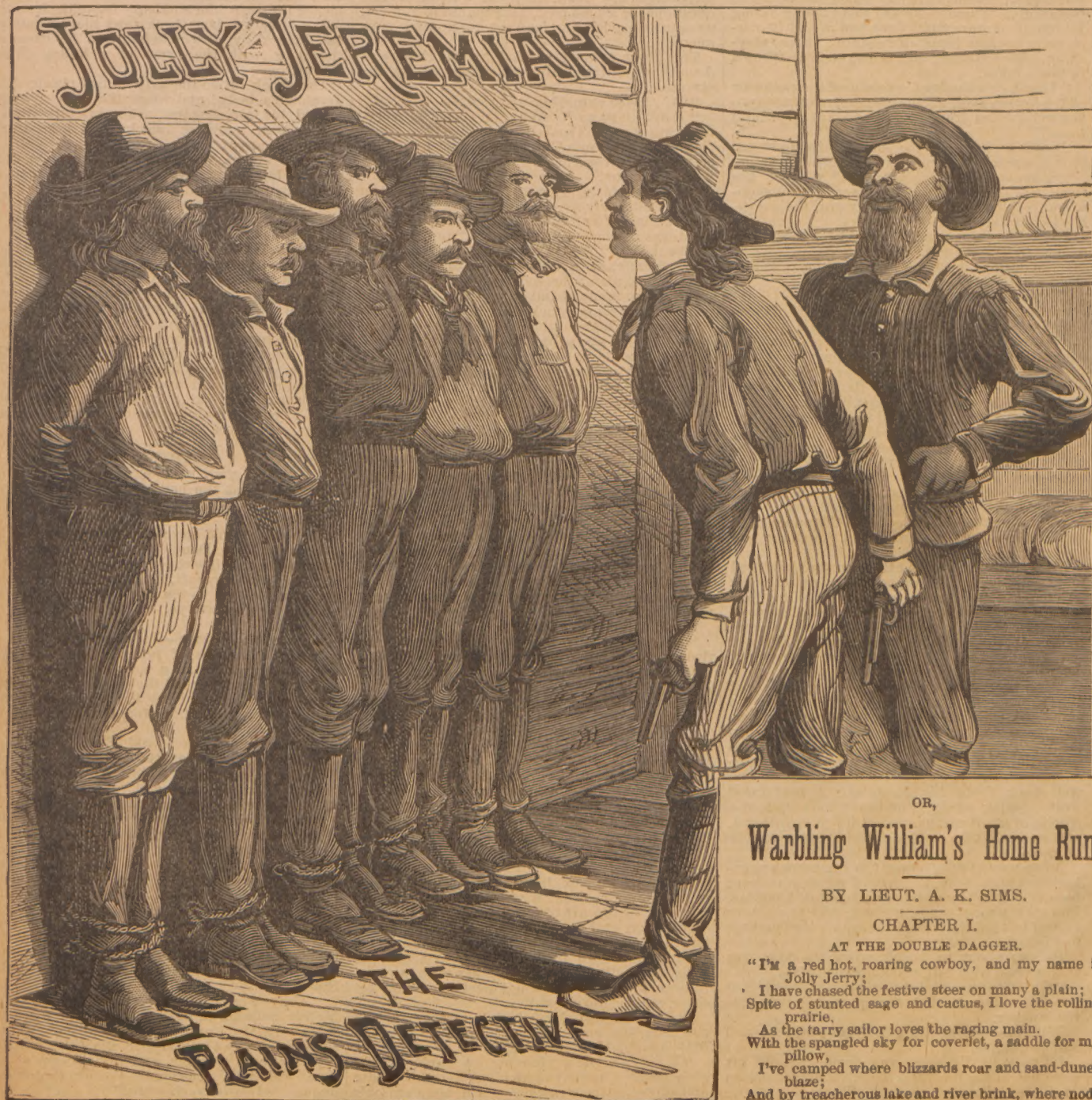
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AND JOLLY JEREMIAH ENJOYED THE SITUATION HUGELY.

OR,

Warbling William's Home Run.

BY LIEUT. A. K. SIMS.

CHAPTER I.

AT THE DOUBLE DAGGER.

"I'm a red hot, roaring cowboy, and my name is Jolly Jerry;
I have chased the festive steer on many a plain;
Spite of stunted sage and cactus, I love the rolling prairie.
As the tarry sailor loves the raging main.
With the spangled sky for coverlet, a saddle for my pillow,
I've camped where blizzards roar and sand-dunes blaze;
And by treacherous lake and river brink, where nods the leafy willow,
I have fought, and drunk the alkali that slays.

"Raging reds, arrayed for battle,
Frightened, charging Texas cattle,
On the grassy slopes of memory arise;
But I downed them all, with neatness,
Took life's bitter with its sweetness;
And I strive to rope good fortune as it flies."

The singer, a small, but compactly-built man, was striding easily down the trail leading toward the bunk-houses of the Double Dagger Ranch.

The Double Dagger, so named from its brand, which resembled that character, [X], was situated on the plains, midway between the towns of Cactus Crossing and Plains City; and the singer had come up from the former place that day, on the mail stage, having alighted from the stage at the combined store and post-office only a few moments before.

Within a stone's throw of the post-office was the ranch-house; and when the stage had been drawn up with a flourish of the driver's whip, and the solitary passenger got out, he at once became the cynosure of two pairs of bright eyes, which peeped at him from one of the ranch-house windows.

The eyes—one pair of which was brown and the other blue—were the property of two handsome young women; and as they laughed and commented—the young women not the eyes—a third pair, greenish-gray in color was added to the group. These belonged to a dashing young Irishman, of sturdy physique and soldierly carriage, who had been half-reclining in an easy-chair and watching the pretty picture framed in the window.

"There, he's singing!" exclaimed the possessor of the brown eyes, as the passenger turned into the well-beaten trail. "Hark! what a splendid tenor!"

Clearly and sweetly the tones floated to them, though the words were only half distinguishable.

"Some coarse drinking song!" sneered the Irishman, the very faintest trace of brogue observable in his speech. "Numbers of these cowboys are good singers."

The evident admiration evinced for the singer seemed to irritate him.

"Not jealous, I hope?" and the blue eyes met the greenish-gray, smilingly.

The young Irishman bit his lip.

"If he was not a very ordinary sort of cowboy, I might be! As it is, I don't see any cause for jealousy. I was just marveling what you could find of interest about the fellow."

"There! You're drowning the song with your chatter!" and the brown eyes flashed. "I want to hear what he's singing about."

The wish was not destined to be gratified, for, extra horses having been hooked on and the stage being again in readiness, the driver twirled his lash till it brought forth a succession of pistol-like reports, and with a rumble and roar and a cloud of dust, the coach bearing Uncle Sam's mail-bags was off and away. Before the confusion consequent thereupon had subsided, the song had ended and the singer had vanished.

All unconscious of the attention thus centered upon himself, the stranger, after a question or two to the Jehu on the box, had turned his face toward the corrals, stables and bunk-houses of the ranch, singing, perhaps, for his own amusement. It was a not unhandsome face, lighted with intelligence, and indicative of energy and decision of character.

As for the stranger himself, he was a little past thirty, dressed in cowboy garb, even in the awkward, high-heeled riding-boots, which usually give a cowboy a clumsy appearance when on his feet. A brown mustache shaded his upper lip, and a lock of short, brown hair showed beneath the big, white hat which was pushed well back from his forehead. A perforated walking-stick made from the woody stalk of a species of giant cactus swung in his right hand, and in his left he carried a bundle—presumably of clothing.

As he was passing one of the bunk-houses, going toward another, the door of which was open, he was assailed by a rough outburst of laughter. The song was at once hushed; and the singer turned toward the room from which the laughter had issued.

He was about to knock, when the door was swung open by a tall, black-bearded giant.

"Oh, 'twas you doin' that singin', hey?" and the voice showed that the questioner was also the laugher.

With the words, the giant gave him a scowl full of menace.

"I thought I'd meet you some day, an' git even wi' ye fer the little trick ye played me up at Plains City last month! What d'ye say to that, hey?"

"That you're mistaken in your man!" was the stranger's calm reply, as he met the fierce gaze of the other. "I never saw you before, to my certain knowledge."

The giant almost blocked the door; but, looking beyond, the singer saw a half dozen cowboys surrounding a rough table strewn with playing cards. They were evidently enjoying the situation hugely, for they were almost bursting with suppressed merriment.

He reddened perceptibly, for the sight was not conducive to coolness and equanimity. It indicated that these rough cowboys, led on by the black-bearded giant, had taken it into their reckless heads to make game of him.

The angry flash of the eyes faded almost instantly, however, and was replaced by a merry twinkle.

"You take me for a tenderfoot, I see! A gentle infant from the effete East, who has never heard the thunder of a stampede nor the music of cracking revolvers. It must be my elegant raiment which has caused the error."

He looked himself over, shifted the stick to the hand containing the bundle, and ran the other up and down his garments, much as a lady would sample silks in a dry-goods establishment.

"Yes, it must be my clothing. It can't be anything else. Well, if you'll answer a few questions, or let me past, I'll promise to reform, as soon as my last foreman sobers up and pays me off."

The giant seemed puzzled by the change of demeanor and the ready wit displayed by the stranger.

"Wot's yer name?" he growled.

"Don't know me? Why, I thought everybody knew me! I'm Jolly Jeremiah, the playful prairie dog from Gopherville, and I wandered the plains ever since I was a pup. Don't know me? Law, suz!"

The statement was greeted by a snicker from within that fairly set the giant wild.

"You air, hey?" and a hard and muscular hand was reached out to grasp the "prairie-dog" by the neck. "Well, I'm Placer Jim, the Californy Grizzly, an' if I git my grip onto ye I'll do ye up in jist about three shakes!"

But the muscular hand only pawed the empty air, for the stranger ducked, and before the giant could recover his equilibrium Jolly Jeremiah had darted by him and gained the center of the room, where he stood, with his right hand half uplifted.

The situation was altogether so ludicrous and provocative of merriment that the cowboys about the table stamped their feet and howled with delight.

The giant was for the moment nonplused. He had sized up the stranger as a tenderfoot, and had thought to amuse himself and scare the other by bluster and threat, but, behold! the tables were apparently being turned on him.

"Any way you want it, pardner!" shouted Jeremiah, dropping his bundle and stick, and teetering up and down, as he elevated his left hand to a defensive position. "Bare knuckles, gloves, go-as-you-please wrestling, a ring and Marquis of Queensbury rules, anything to accommodate you! Why, dost thou hesitate, my noble Goth?"

Again the cowboys howled.

"Blast my eyes, if I don't jam ye through the floor!" Placer Jim exclaimed, diving wildly forward. "I'll pulverize ye into mince-meat! I'll—"

What else he would do was not made clear, for the sentence was suddenly terminated. While striving to grapple with the stranger, the latter writhed sidewise like a serpent, and, with a quick grip and a deft twist, threw the giant sprawling to the floor, where he lay for an instant considerably shaken and half-dazed.

Before he had recovered, Jeremiah was in his old position, and again teetering up and down like a trim game chicken preparing to fight a clumsy shanghai.

This time Placer Jim approached with more caution, for he had been brought to a sudden realization of the fact that he was dealing with a master of the art of self-defense. A sense of humiliation and the cowboys' shrieks of laughter, however, drove him to recklessness; and after one or two futile attempts to grasp his agile antagonist, he made another rush, aiming to bear the other down and overthrow him by sheer weight and strength.

It resulted as before, though neither he nor the laughing cowboys could tell just how the little man had accomplished it.

"What kind of a feller air ye, anyhow?" the giant roared, as he raised himself on his elbow and stared at the stranger. "I'll bet a season's wages ye can't do that again!"

"Don't do it. You'd lose. I'll not be hard on you, though. Toe the mark again and we'll try a fair wrestle. You couldn't be expected to understand that little twist, seeing that you'd never run across it before."

He was smiling in such a jolly, genial way that the gathering anger of Placer Jim was partially dissipated. No man likes to be beaten in a contest, and in that respect Placer Jim was very human. He believed if he could once grip the stranger, his enormous strength and bear-like hug would effectually prevent the use of those back-and-leg-breaking twists and give him such an advantage that the result of the struggle could not be in doubt.

Thus believing, he again got on his feet and approached his comparatively diminutive adversary.

The latter allowed him to advance until within reaching distance. Then, with bowed head, Jeremiah darted forward, clutching the giant about the middle, and locking a sinewy leg about the giant's brawny calf.

"Oh, I've got ye!" Placer Jim shouted, exultantly. "I've got ye now, an' don't ye fergit it!"

At the same time he wound his long arms about the other and tightened them until it seemed the latter's ribs would be crushed in. But, his exultation was short-lived. That locked leg drew him suddenly from his feet, the bulky body was bent backward like a straining oak struck by a whirlwind, and he came to the floor with the crash of a falling Eiffel Tower.

The shock broke the grip he had obtained on Jeremiah's body; and when the lithe stranger buried his iron fingers in the brawny throat, Placer Jim, knowing that he had been fairly beaten, shouted:

"You kin git up; I ain't no hog! Ye done me up fair an' squar', an' I ain't the man to hold sich as that ag'in' any one."

Thus assured, Jeremiah released his grip on the throat, and the beaten giant scrambled to his feet.

"Shake!" he cried, extending a hand, as soon as he was steady on his legs. "You're a good 'un, and if ever ye're in trouble an' need a frien' to stan' by ye, don't fergit my post-office address, will ye? The way you kin handle them flippers, though, I don't know that ye'd ever have much occasion for assistance."

"I hope my post-office address may be the same as yours," Jolly Jeremiah returned, coolly holding up his hand and inspecting the fingers which the giant had almost squeezed to a pulp. "Will you introduce me to your foreman, please. I want a job."

CHAPTER II.

TWO FAIR WOMEN.

"She's up at the house!" said Placer, with a grin.

"She?"

"Yes; we don't have no common truck for foreman of the Double Dagger, but one wot wears silks an' all sort o' female flip-flaps, an' as purty as a photygraft, into the bargain. Lemme interduce ye to the boys, frist, an' then I'll walk up there wi' ye. Wot did ye say yer handle is?"

"Jeremiah Jackson—Jolly Jeremiah!"

When the series of introductions had been gone through with in a manner to thoroughly satisfy the giant, he led the way from the bunk-house, with Jeremiah at his heels, and turned up the dusky trail which the latter had so recently descended.

"There's the place," said Placer, pointing a knucky forefinger at the building. "You'll find her ahint them walls. I'll step into the post-office while ye're a-chinnin' her. Luck to ye, fer we're a-needin' men like you jist now."

Jeremiah was scarcely prepared for the vision of female loveliness which broke upon him when he was admitted to an audience with Miss Madge Farrington, the controller of the destiny of the Double Dagger Ranch. She was the brown-eyed beauty who had watched his movements and listened to his singing from the window.

Pearl, her blue-eyed sister, was in the audience-room at the time of his visit, as was also the stalwart young Irishman, who was presented as Captain Philip Gaston, lately of the United States Army.

"Yes, we're needing men now, Mr. Jackson," Madge had said, in reply to his interrogatory.

"Perhaps we can give you a place. My late foreman treated me rather shabbily, quitting my service in a pique, and taking some of the men with him. I presume you are thoroughly acquainted with ranch work?"

Jeremiah bowed an assent.

"Since he went away, I have had charge of affairs, and the cowboys, I believe, call me the fore-lady," and she laughed merrily. "I had charge though, more or less, even when he was here. Pearl and I have always lived on the plains. Our father, who was a cattleman, died two years ago. Our brother attends to the store, and so Pearl and I look after the business of the ranch."

Jeremiah scarcely heard the story, though he seemed to be paying great attention. The truth is, her beauty had so strongly impressed itself on him that he was fascinated, and his senses were lulled into a state of dreamy rapture, her words taking on the character of soothing and far-away music.

She did not know this, and talked on, apparently pleased to have some one with whom she could converse, aside from her every-day companions.

Pearl joined in occasionally, but Gaston sat with lips half-parted in scorn, an uneasy look on his face, tugging savagely at his fierce, black mustache.

If rumor among the cowboys could be trusted, the young Irishman was a successful suitor for the hand of the blue-eyed beauty. He had come to the ranch, indeed, in a way that was quite romantic and well calculated to touch the heart of a woman of Pearl's peculiar mentality.

His home was said to be in Denver, and while en route in the mail stage from Cactus Crossing to Plains City he fell sick of mountain fever. So sick that he was put off at the Double Dagger Ranch. Here he was given the best of attention, the Farringtons and the kind-hearted cowboys vying with each other in their good offices.

His illness was of considerable duration, and his convalescence protracted. Through it all Pearl was his almost constant attendant, and his recovery, so the rumor ran, was followed by their engagement.

There was much reason to believe this last true, for he still tarried at the ranch, and his attitude toward Pearl appeared that of an accepted lover.

His bearing proclaimed that he had been a soldier, and the statement he had made when left at the ranch was that he was for some years a captain in the regular army, stationed at various points in the West.

When Jolly Jeremiah had secured the assurance that his services would be acceptable on the Double Dagger Ranch, he retreated, in some confusion and with the air of a man who is just emerging from a dream.

He felt that he had never been so awkward and tongue-tied since arriving at the age of responsibility, and was anxious to get away from the presence of a woman who could thus influence him.

"I'm a fool!" he ejaculated, fiercely. "What is there about the girl to throw me off my pegs in that way? I've seen plenty of pretty women in my time. Still, she is uncommonly handsome. I don't remember ever having seen a handsomer. And I suppose, too, that my silly actions made her think me an awful booby, with hardly enough sense to say yes or no, when questioned. Serves me right, though."

"Heigh-ho! I'm afraid I'm getting to be sentimental. And after all these years! Yes, and when I've something more important to think about than pretty woman and love."

"Love! Bah! I'll have none of it!" It was much easier to say this, however, than it was to banish from his mind the vision which persisted in haunting him, and when he returned the greetings of Placer Jim, and replied to that worthy's queries, it was very evident that his mind was not on the subject of the conversation.

When Jolly Jeremiah had quitted the ranch-house, the young Irishman gave his black mustache a fiercer tug than usual. With the tug the brows contracted, as if there were some mysterious connection between them and the jetty mustache.

"I think you committed a great error, Miss Farrington, in employing that fellow, if I may be permitted a suggestion."

"Why, pray?" and Madge gave Gaston a look of surprise.

"I'm likely to be wrong, of course," with an air of great gravity and wisdom, "but there was something in his appearance that prepossessed me against him. What, I hardly know. I'm almost sure, though, that I've seen that face before. And the circumstances surrounding it when I saw it were not favorable, either."

He hesitated and glanced at Pearl, as if desiring her moral support before going on. Madge noted the glance, and was not particularly pleased thereat.

"Whatever is on your mind, Captain Gaston,

speaking it out. I hope you have no reason to beat about the bush in our presence."

"Certainly not. I had a sudden doubt of the propriety of expressing my thoughts at all. I may be wholly mistaken, and do the fellow a great injustice."

Madge noted the repetition of the obnoxious word "fellow," but allowed him to continue.

"It's no news to you when I state that there have been many robberies recently, and in this vicinity, of the mail-stage. We have all been pained and chagrined because of them. The latest occurred only the week before last. They have brought this section and this stage line into very bad odor, and have given to the outer world the impression that the country lying between Cactus Crossing and Plains City is tenanted by as desperate a set of cut-throats as the world ever saw."

"Thinking of that, the other thought came to me that this fellow might be one of the band that has been holding up the stages, and was perhaps seeking employment here for a purpose. And when that dim memory of the time when I saw a face, if not the same, at least very similar in appearance—and that face in a prisoner's dock and on trial for highway robbery—when that came to me, I was overwhelmed by a feeling that in employing him you were committing a great mistake."

Pearl shivered and gave a little shriek as Gaston slowly and impressively counted out the words, but Madge seemed in no way dismayed by the ominous information.

"I think you are wrong, captain. Allow me that privilege, please. I'm a pretty good judge of the human face divine, and there are no such words as 'thief' and 'robber' written on the gentleman's countenance—for he may be a gentleman, though only a cowboy."

"Don't understand that I mean to accuse him of being either!" Gaston hastily exclaimed. "I was afraid you might jump to that conclusion, and that was why I hesitated. I don't know anything about him. He may be as open and honest as the day."

The tones implied a belief that he was not, but that the speaker would not be so uncharitable as to put the belief into words.

"Whatever he is he surely has a kind heart," Pearl laughingly averred. "He permitted Madge to do all the talking; a pleasure she hasn't enjoyed for lol these many days."

"A little diffident in the presence of so much beauty," and Madge echoed back the laugh. "As far as silence goes, though, I noticed that the captain held his own pretty well. It was nip and tuck between the two as to which could be mummiest and grummiest. I'm not sure but the captain succeeded. He certainly tried hard enough."

"No doubt I was wrong," said Gaston. "Forget what I have said, and we'll think no more about it."

Then with the air of a man who has done his duty amid adverse circumstances, he took up his hat and strolled out into the bright sunlight.

CHAPTER III.

RAID OF THE ROAD AGENTS.

THE overthrow, in bloodless and friendly contest, of the black-bearded giant, Placer Jim, by the new cowboy, Jolly Jeremiah; and the good-humored way in which Placer had accepted his defeat, was the talk of the ranch for a week or more, and served to gain for Jeremiah a kindly and cordial reception. Friends and adherents flocked around him, the strongest and most loyal being Placer Jim himself.

"Hain't nobody likes a man better'n I do; an' he's a man, ever' inch of him," Placer frequently remarked, in explanation of his conduct. "He downed me fair an' squar', an' I don't hold no sich ag'in' anybody, you hear me? Hain't nary 'nother man on the ranch w'ot kin do it, though," ending his declaration with a challenging survey of the crowd.

In spite of Gaston's lugubrious statements, Jeremiah gained such favor at the ranch-house that at the end of two weeks he was sent to Cactus Crossing, by Miss Farrington herself, on an errand requiring considerable skill and judgment—the said errand being no less than the negotiation of the sale of some cattle which were almost ready for the market.

Gaston scowled at this—scowled more blackly than usual, if that were possible—but kept his thoughts to himself, fearing to venture any more semi-prophecies, for the more he prophesied the greater grew the influence of the new cowboy.

"I suppose if I should declare I know him to be a thief, Miss Farrington would at once ap-

point him foreman of the whole outfit," he growled, in uneasy self-communion. "Of all the strange things of this life, women and their ways are the strangest. One can no more tell what a woman will do, under stated circumstances, than he can tell which way the wind will be blowing to-morrow."

All of which went to show that Captain Philip Gaston was much dissatisfied with the progress of affairs at the Double Dagger.

Having performed his mission, Jolly Jeremiah took the first stage out, wishing to return as quickly as possible. This stage chanced to have a night run, changing horses at the ranch at about four o'clock, in the morning.

Besides Jeremiah, there were two other passengers, both bound for Plains City; one being a stout and fussy little man, and the other on the order of the genus dude; and, no sooner had the stage started on its long journey than they began to talk of the dreadful robberies which had been recently committed on the route.

Their talk was rather annoying to the cowboy, who would have preferred to meditate uninterrupted on the many charms of the young woman who had seen fit to trust him with so important a commission. He had, as he believed, negotiated the sale very satisfactorily. She would be pleased, he knew, with the terms wrung from the close-grained cattle-buyer; and the thought was so pleasant that he liked to turn it over and over and view it from every imaginable point.

He still told himself that his feeling for the young lady was only that of admiration and warm friendship. That it *must* be no more. That, under present circumstances, love was a toy he could not afford to play with.

Nevertheless, his thoughts continued to turn again and again to the bright face and warm brown eyes, which, on the day he had first seen them, had held so much fascination for him.

In this frame of mind, it is not to be wondered at that the fearful talk of the dude and the fussy, little man jarred on his feelings. It was as bad as that detestable old habit of the ancients of bringing a ghastly and grinning skeleton into the midst of the cheer and joviality of the feast.

"D-do you think there is-a-weally any danger?" the dude gasped, turning at last to Jeremiah. "Donchuknow, I truly wish I hadn't started on this jouney!"

"Shoul'n't be surprised!" Jeremiah replied, sure that he wished the other had never started. "The road-agents are rather bad out this way. They killed a young fellow from Boston, only last week."

It was too dark to see the look with which this was received by the dude, but Jeremiah imagined it and laughed softly to himself.

"Did the young chap have any money?" the fussy man questioned, evidently holding wealth above even human life.

"Not certain about that!" was the dry answer.

"He was a fool if he did. I never carry money with me, or only enough to pay my actual expenses."

"You've a gold-ticker, though, and you might as well prepare to give it up. Cheyenne Rock isn't more than a mile ahead of us, now, and there's where the gentlemanly toll-takers usually congregate."

The fussy man gave a despairing snort, and hauling out his watch, stuffed it carefully into a niche beneath the seat.

In spite of his prediction, Jolly Jeremiah had no idea that the road-agents were even then lying in wait for them in the black shadow of the rock, and in the blacker shadows of the gorge which ran near its base. Such was, however, the case; and when the driver gave the horses an extra cut on rounding the dangerous bend, the masked figure of the road-agent leader stepped into the middle of the trail, and with leveled Winchester ordered him to halt.

So peremptory seemed the command, and so full of threatening menace was the voice in which it was delivered, that the scared driver almost threw himself backward from the box in his frantic efforts to obey.

Then, out of the shadows, stepped a half-score of armed men, and surrounded the hapless stage.

"Hands up, and tumble out of there!" the leader shouted. "Tumble out, every one of you. We haven't any time for foolishness. And, remember, that the first one that touches a weapon gets a bullet through him."

It was useless to argue against this sort of logic. The driver descended first, with hands elevated, having doubtless become thoroughly familiar with the trick from much practice. Jeremiah followed; and, then, with many groans

and contortions came the dude, who expected to be murdered, and the fussy man, who thought that being robbed was worse than death.

"All out! Get in a row, there! Recollect that I've got my eyes on you."

The threat seemed also a command, for at the words, two of the road-agents began to search the passengers, while two more turned their attention to the mail-pouches and the interior of the coach. The pouches were ruthlessly ripped open, and the registered mail and such other letters as seemed of possible value extracted. The interior of the stage apparently yielded nothing.

Of the passengers, the dude suffered most, for he had a goodly sum of money secreted on his person. Jeremiah and the fussy man scarcely paid for the plucking.

"Egad! they didn't get my watch!" the fussy man exclaimed triumphantly, when the robbers had disappeared and they were again on their way. "Only fools carry money with them."

Then he darted a scornful look at the crushed dude, who only groaned in answer.

On arriving at the Double Dagger, the outrage was at once reported, and a pursuit organized. To Jeremiah's disgust, the Irishman assumed command of the pursuing party.

At his orders, Jeremiah took the post of guide. The orders were no sooner given, however, than they were recalled; and a time-consuming discussion of the probable route the road-agents had taken was begun.

Day was at hand, and Jeremiah felt that if they expected to accomplish anything, the pursuit should be commenced in earnest and at once. He said as much to Gaston, but received only a sneer for his pains.

They started at last, however, and on reaching Cheyenne Rock closely searched the earth thereabout for hoofprints. As none were found, Jeremiah suggested that the road-agents might still be concealed in the gorge, which was thickly grown with stunted trees and screening bushes. But Gaston insisted that the robbers must have fled toward Plains City—that it was foolish to expect to find them still in the gorge, and led the party northward at a rapid gait.

No trail was struck between Cheyenne Rock and Plains City, and when they reached the latter place, none of its inhabitants knew anything more of the raid than what had been communicated by the driver of the mail stage.

"We've been chasing thistle-down!" Jeremiah growled, as he rode at the side of Placer Jim, on the return trip. "For all the good we've accomplished, we might just as well have stayed at home."

He had lost the jolly mood which was his usual characteristic, and seemed vexed and generally out of sorts.

"Jist w'ot I says!" the giant agreed. "I b'lieve the skunks war in that gorge, jist as you said. Cap Gaston's as heady as a wild broncho, though, and when he gets an idee sot, he hangs to it jist like a dog to a root."

Jeremiah seemed about to venture some other observation on the subject, but he checked himself, and hastened to change the subject.

CHAPTER IV.

YOUNG FARRINGTON.

"MAY I be switched!"

It seemed an odd exclamation, in a country where switches, unless manufactured ones, were almost as rarely seen as the proverbial hens' teeth.

Frank Farrington stood, lamp in hand, by the open door of a safe, which the makers, for a high figure, had warranted to be absolutely fire and burglar-proof. The open door seemed to testify more strongly than words that, whatever might be its fire-defying qualities, it could not resist the lock-picking expertness of an accomplished safe-breaker.

"Cleaned out, slick as an onion! And while I was lying there, too, snoring like a sea-horse. The fellow was a good one, to go through the concern like that and never wake me."

He glanced from the bed where he had been sleeping, to the open safe, measured the distance with his eye, and puckered his lips in a low whistle.

He was a well-built, sturdy youth of sixteen or thereabout, and his scanty night-clothing revealed limbs and arms that for muscular development would have done no discredit to a trained athlete.

"I'll have to call in Jeremiah, and see what he thinks about it," he muttered, bending forward to assure himself that the burglar had really made a clean sweep. "Better leave it just as it is, I suppose, till he takes a look at it.

He's as sharp as a cactus spine, and maybe can tell how the thing was done and give an idea as to who done it."

In the days that had slipped so quickly by, Frank Farrington and Jolly Jeremiah had become warm and fast friends. The latter admired the youth for his lovable and open disposition, and Farrington was drawn toward Jeremiah by that strange and subtle influence which the jolly cowboy seemed to exercise on almost every one who came within the circle of his acquaintance.

There were other ties, also, serving to bind them together. Young Farrington disliked Philip Gaston, and in no sense could Jeremiah be said to be an admirer of the dashing Irish captain.

Gaston slept at the store with young Farrington, however; and the latter, being a gentleman, treated him with kindness and consideration, in spite of his intense dislike.

On the night in question Gaston was absent at Cactus Crossing, and Farrington had remained at the store, never dreaming of burglars, and least of all anticipating that one could open the safe and extract its contents without arousing him.

"Yes, I'll have to call in Jeremiah, and let him take a look at it, before speaking of the robbery to any one else," and he set the lamp on the store counter, and began to slip hurriedly into his clothing.

He found the cowboy asleep in his cot at one of the bunk-houses.

"Wake up!" he whispered, giving the sleeper a shake.

Then, as Jeremiah opened his eyes and looked about in a bewildered way, Farrington stepped softly to the door, placed his fingers on his lips to indicate that silence was desirable, and beckoned Jeremiah to follow him.

"What's the matter?" the cowboy whispered, when they were together in the shadows of the buildings. "Haven't run across a ghost or a road-agent? That whisper of yours startled me like a fire alarm."

"Just so it didn't startle any one else! I haven't struck a road-agent, but a road-agent has struck me pretty heavy. Come along and I'll show you."

Without further explanation he led the way at a brisk gait, and when the store-room was gained, pointed silently to the open and rifled safe.

The cowboy took in the situation at a glance; and, walking over to the safe, examined it critically.

"You're sure you locked it last night?" looking into the face of Farrington, who was bending over him.

"Positive. I never forgot that but once, and the recollection of that slip scared me so I've never forgot it since."

"Besides yourself, who understand the combination?" with that same keen look.

"Nobody. That is nobody but Madge and Pearl. I told it to them, one day, and showed 'em how the thing worked. I suppose they've forgot all about it, though, before now."

"Well," rising from his survey, "this was done by some one who knows the combination. It was simply unlocked, just as you would unlock it, and then the money was taken."

Farrington stared.

"You're sure?"

"As sure as I can be of anything. That safe was never touched by a tool of any kind."

"But I don't see how that can be!"

"Perhaps not; but it's true."

"Why, Madge or Pearl wouldn't—"

"Of course not. I don't mean to intimate that they know anything about it, any more than I mean to intimate that you do. I'm simply stating facts, which any expert will bear me out in. That safe, as I say, was never touched by a burglar's tool."

Young Farrington ran his fingers through his hair, in a bewildered way.

"There isn't any way, I suppose, by which any one could obtain the secret of the combination? Did you ever keep it on a slip of paper, to assist your memory or for any other purpose?"

"Why, yes; I did that when I first got the safe!" the puzzled young fellow replied.

"And that was how long ago?"

"About four months."

"And you destroyed that slip, soon after?"

Again he ran his fingers through his hair, as if to recall this unconsidered trifle by a vigorous manipulation of his scalp.

"I really don't know. I must have done so, though I can't remember anything about it."

"And if not destroyed it might, if not disturbed by other hands, still be lying in the

money drawer under the counter; for I presume that's where you kept it?"

"I suppose it might!" and Farrington slipped behind the counter, with the lamp, to take a peep into the drawer.

"It isn't there, now, at any rate."

"Certainly not. It was taken, according to my guess, by the man who went through the safe to-night."

The youth could do nothing but stare stupidly at his cross-examiner.

"Where is Gaston?"

"He hasn't been home since day before yesterday."

"Still at Cactus Crossing, is he?"

Then, bending forward and sinking his voice to a whisper:

"Do you know, I believe that scamp is at the bottom of this? If my guess is correct, he's at Cactus Crossing for a purpose, and that purpose is to foment suspicion from him and start the people here on a wrong scent."

This statement of the cowboy's was the most surprising of all. Startling, in fact, to Frank Farrington, who would never have thought of connecting Philip Gaston with the robbery of the safe.

"You are hardly prepared to believe it, eh? Perhaps I spoke too soon. I have good reason, though, for my suspicion."

"You must be mistaken!" Farrington insisted. "Think of Pearl."

"I have thought of her!" gravely. "If I am correct, the sooner he is unmasked the better for her, and the better for all of us."

He deliberately closed the door of the safe, placed a chair for Frank, and drew up another for himself.

"We might as well talk it over, seeing that I've gone so far. I've suspected Gaston almost from the first. After the robbery of the stage my suspicions took on the form of certainty. You remember he had charge of the pursuit, or rather the pretended pursuit, for it was nothing more. The way he conducted that was of itself enough to convince any observing man that he is an ally of the men who have been doing the robbing around here lately."

"I know what you would say," as Frank opened his lips to interrupt. "He was not here when the work of the road-agents commenced. That is true. He may have been connected with them then or he may have joined them since. It doesn't matter. I am satisfied he is their friend and ally, and perhaps more."

"He purposely led the pursuing party astray that morning. I saw it, but dared not say anything, even if I had been so inclined. His actions, though, convicted him, as far as I am concerned. And now, having obtained the combination and planned this burglary, as I believe, he has gone to Cactus Crossing to avert suspicion from himself."

Frank, having no very kindly feeling for the absent man, was yet unwilling to judge him hastily, and sat for a long time turning over in his mind the arguments advanced by the cowboy.

"Strange that you should bring almost the same charges against each other," he said, at last. "The first time Gaston saw you he warned Madge against you, saying he more than half-believed you belonged to the road-agent band, and had come here for the purpose of being better able to carry out your plans."

"Did he say that?" and Jeremiah's face took on a gratified look, much to the young man's astonishment.

"Of course none of us believed him right."

"I hope not, I'm sure. I'm glad, though, that he made the charge. To my judgment, it's another link in the chain of evidence. He could have no good reason for thinking that of me, when he had never seen me before; and it goes to prove that he was fearful suspicion might turn against some one for acts committed, or to be committed, and he thought to take time by the forelock and give said suspicion a little yank in the direction he wished it to go. Who knows but he may have some such idea as that I had ventured here to spy him out?"

Farrington again indulged in a long silence.

"I believe you are right," he declared, when he spoke. "He has attempted to cheat me at cards several times, and a man who will do that is not above doing worse."

It was Jeremiah's turn to be astonished.

"And he has been teaching you card playing? And has been cheating you, you say?"

"Trying to cheat me!"

"The principle is the same. The man who attempts robbery is as bad as the man who succeeds in committing the crime. Do your sisters know of this?"

Farrington looked guilty, and hung his head. "No; and I don't want them to know of it." "I sha'n't mention it. My advice is this: Shut up the safe; say nothing about the robbery; keep your own counsel, and watch Philip Gaston as closely as if you knew him to be the guilty party! Take my word for it, he knows more about this affair than he would be willing to confess. If we're wary and cautious, we can expose the whole thing, by and by."

CHAPTER V.

CRUSHING A CONSPIRACY.

WITH all his good humor, his free and easy manner, his abundant wit, his sparkling songs, Jeremiah found a class among the cowboys whom he could not approach. He had made it his special study to gain the good will of all, to have them for friends and confidants, to be one of them in reality as well as in name, but he was soon made conscious that, as far as these men were concerned, he had signally failed.

They were not a numerous class, less than six in number, but among so small a body of men, the number was sufficiently large to make its influence felt in various ways. The Double Dagger was one of the largest ranches on the plains, but, except in special times, required only a small force to do its work. It is the way with most ranches, where cattle are not attempted to be held within limited boundaries by line-riders.

The leader of these malcontents—for they were a shirking, restless lot—was a vicious and ignorant cowboy known as Curly. He was Placer Jim's particular object of aversion. More than once he and the black-bearded giant had come to the point of blows, and the result was that Curly held Placer in considerable dread.

"It's a sing'lar thing to me," Placer remarked, one day, to Jeremiah, in speaking of Curly and his cronies, "that them fellers sh'd take sich a fancy to Cap Gaston. Hang me, if I kin understand that at all. They're as thick as fleas on a mangy dog, an' whenever that blasted Irishman winks they're ready to nod."

Jeremiah had noticed the same thing, and had his own theory to account for it, though he was not yet ready to reveal it to Placer.

"It's as you say," he replied, shoving his hat back on his forehead and speaking in his customary jovial and hearty tones. "No doubt there'll be cards out for a wedding, soon, between Curly and Gaston. It seems to be a case of true love, without the little jolts which are said to be a necessary accompaniment of that blissful condition. I hope they'll not forget us, when they extend their invitations."

"They're married, already, if meanness kin tie people together," Placer growled. "Gaston and Curly has more little love chats, off to their selves, than any six men 'ud seem to have any occasion fer. An' they ain't no good in 'em, take my word fer it."

"And I suppose you've noticed that after each of these love chats Curly is glummer than usual—something very singular, for on ordinary occasions he's about as glum as men get to be and live. If he don't die of bilious fever, one of these days, it will be because an extra accumulation of bile has no perceptible effect on his constitution."

The giant laughed, and remarked that the probabilities were that Curly's career would be cut short with a bullet or a rope before the bile had a chance to get in its work.

The effect of the "love chats" mentioned, became more and more perceptible as the days passed. The time for the spring round-up was approaching; and, as a foreman would have to be selected to take charge of that, it became whispered about that Jeremiah was an aspirant for the place.

The good-humored cowboy had never thought of aspiring to the position. His first thought was that Placer Jim or some of his friends had started the rumor, hoping in that way to direct attention to him as an available man, and thus secure for him the place. But, on questioning Placer about it, he discovered that the rumor was being circulated by the allies of Curly, with the evident intention of arousing and fostering a jealousy against him.

"That Gaston is a long-headed devil," he muttered, when Placer had departed. "He don't know exactly what to make of me; but, to be on the safe side, is determined to run me off the place. Failing in that, he probably thinks to so weaken my influence among the men as to make me virtually powerless to work him harm. Well, I won't go!"

It soon became apparent that something sterner than a mere effort to stir up bad feeling

against Jeremiah was on foot. Curly's men began to stare askance whenever they passed him; and in their communications with him developed into an uncivil lot of dogs. Only their fear of his prowess kept them from open and flagrant insults.

After that first conversation, Placer had been diligent in his efforts to discover the secret of the trouble. He could not hope to learn anything from Curly, himself, but instructed a friend, who was on speaking terms with Curly's allies, to keep his eyes and ears open for indications of mischief. As a result the secrets of the plotters were laid bare, and as soon as he understood Curly's plans, he proceeded to communicate them to Jeremiah.

"They say you're turnin' the Farringtons, both gals and boy, ag'in 'em, an' that you're sot on becomin' foreman o' the round-up, which they'll be teetotally dashed if you shall. They've be'n hyer longer'n you, an' so think they've a better right hyer than you, an' propose to show it. Jest tip the word, though, that you r'aly want to be foreman, an' I'll show 'em who's stronger hyer, Curly er Placer Jim."

"Not at all, though I'm obliged to you for the kindness and honor. I haven't any desire to be foreman, and if they had a thimbleful of brains they'd know it."

"Which they ain't!" sententiously.

"No doubt you understand that Curly is only a tool in this business. Gaston is the real leader."

"I've s'picioned as much. They ain't no good in that Gaston; an' if the Farringtons could only be made to see it, it'd be better for 'em in the end."

"What do they intend to do?" and Jeremiah looked earnestly at his big friend.

"I hadn't got to that yet. While they hain't had the grit to spit it right out, they've been hintin' 'round, in an underminin' way, that you're hand in glove with them blasted road-agents, an' that it's a disgrace to 'low you to stay hyer any longer."

"So, they've fixed up a plan to git rid o' you. When it's to be done I don't know—couldn't find out. But, they're a-goin' to take ye out some night, whip ye half to death w' quirts, brand ye in the hand to show that ye're a thief, an' then turn you loose—w' the understandin' that if ye come back they'll hang ye to the tail of a broncho an' let him go."

A red light glowed in the cowboy's eyes, as he listened to the ominous words.

"So that's their game, is it? I'll try to be ready for the gentlemen, when they endeavor to carry their lovely scheme into effect."

"Count me in at the circus!" Placer exclaimed, warmly.

"I know, of course, that I can rely on you, Placer. You're a gentleman, every inch of you!"

"Which makes me about the heftiest one in this country," with a smiling survey of his herculean proportions.

At this, the old smile came back to Jeremiah's face.

"Keep absolutely mum on the subject, will you? I don't want them to know I have an inkling of their intentions."

Then they separated, Placer to visit a neighboring ranch and Jolly Jeremiah to resume his routine work on the place.

The knowledge that such a dastardly outrage was contemplated was not the pleasantest thing to carry around in one's breast. It was too much like anticipating a stab in the back on some dark night, without knowing when or from whence the stab would come. Still, the cowboy, if he felt any uneasiness, managed to conceal the feeling wonderfully well; and Curly and his pals never guessed that he had been made acquainted with the full details of the plot.

He even thought he could discover a softening in their attitude toward him; and decided that they probably regarded him as the cat does the mouse which it expects to crush and destroy when the time and mood wills.

Gaston, having satisfactorily arranged his plans, was seen with the conspirators less than formerly. Much of the time he remained in the house, conversing with Madge and Pearl, or lounged about the store and post-office, to Frank's ill-concealed disgust. To Jeremiah, when they chanced to meet, he was even respectful, and almost cordial.

Well prepared as the latter was, the bolt descended when he least expected. The very quietness of Curly and his men had a lulling effect, and a considerable lapse of time having occurred, he drifted into carelessness.

One evening, after dark, and while Placer

Jim and most of Jeremiah's friends were detained till a late hour on the range, Curly stalked silently and ominously into the bunk-room, where Jeremiah was sitting, reading a paper. Curly's pals stalked as silently after him, their hands thrust carelessly into their pockets, holding their weapons in readiness.

The cowboy, understanding that the long anticipated time had come, tossed the paper on the cot, and looked up with an air of smiling serenity.

"What can I do for you, gentlemen?" glancing from one to the other. "From your attitude, I judge you have paid me a call on business of importance."

"Right ye air, me noble dook!" Curly snarled, "we've come for ye, an' we mean to have ye," at the same time attempting to draw his revolver.

The apparently unprepared and defenseless cowboy was too quick for him, however. Before Curly could get his hands out of his pockets, he found himself covered by a deadly derringer, held in Jeremiah's right hand, while another, held in his left, threatened Curly's adherents.

"You can have me, or as much of me as I choose to give, which is as much lead as these cannons will carry."

Curly's pals, not expecting so prompt a defiance, tumbled backward over each other, in their haste to get out of the range of the murderous-looking weapon, while Curly paled perceptibly, and seemed also on the point of flight.

"Come on!" exclaimed Jeremiah, with a sardonic laugh. "You've set on this egg for a long time, and now you might as well hatch it. The chicken may die of neglect, if the process is postponed longer."

"You've got the drop!" Curly protested. "Put down yer weepsons, an' I'll fight ye myself."

"I admire a brave man, Curly, but you wouldn't do it. Every one of your rascals would pitch into me at the same time. It don't do to trust men of your kidney."

"I said I'd do ye up," Curly howled, "an' blast me, if you'll gimme a show. I'll do it."

"Why this sudden thirst for gore, Curly?" looking at him calmly over the derringer barrel.

"You're a sneakin' kyote!" the rascal screamed, driven to wildness by his exasperation. "You've been turnin' the forelady, an' all the rest o' the Farrington crew ag'inst us, hopin' to git to be foreman o' the round-up."

"Which place I presume you wish to fill?"

"An' besides you're one of these tarnal road-agents, into the bargain!"

"Which is the lie of a dirty dog—as you are!"

"Put down yer weepsons!" Curly shouted, dancing up and down in his excitement, and fairly livid with rage. "Put down yer weepsons, and I'll whale the life outen you, that's what I'll do!"

"You and all four of your men put your weapons in that box, revolvers, knives and everything, and I'll follow suit; then I'll accept your offer—not otherwise."

The box referred to was a stout, iron-bound affair, almost burglar-proof, which one of the cowboys of the ranch used as a receptacle for his clothing. There was a key in the lock.

Five men against one! The odds were so great that Curly pitched his knife and revolver into the box and directed his men to do likewise. He knew he could not cope with Jeremiah, single-handed, but counted on the aid of his pals to assist him in "doing the cowboy up."

"Now, come away from the box, and I'll place my tools in there and lock it."

"No you don't!" the rascal shouted, thinking he was about to be entrapped. "Gimme yer weepsons and I'll put 'em in fer ye!"

The reply was a menacing gesture with the deadly derringer, that caused the disarmed ruffian to recoil.

Then, without lowering his weapons, Jeremiah stepped to the box, and attempted to turn the key with his knee. Failing in this he placed one of the derringers on the top of the box, and, by threatening Curly with the other, held the pack at bay until he could lock the box and extract the key.

"Now, I've got you!" he exclaimed, again taking up the weapon, and rising to a standing posture. "A man would be an egregious ass who would trust any of you with a ten cent piece further than he could see you. You came here to whip, and degrade, and perhaps murder me, and in meeting such a scoundrelly crew I feel justified in using every advantage that may be obtainable. I've got you where I want you, now, and I mean to keep you there."

Curly's men, on coming into the room, in order

to take Jeremiah at greater disadvantage, had closed the door behind them; and this it was now impossible to open, without drawing on themselves, as they believed, the fire of those unerring derringers. Such a chorus of curses as ascended from their lips when they perceived how cleverly they had been trapped!

"I ought to shoot you down, one at a time!" cried Jeremiah, noting, with great satisfaction, their fear-stricken faces. "And I may do it, too, if you tempt me too far. I'm just in the mood."

At that instant the trampling of a horse's feet was heard on the outside, and the gruff voice of Placer Jim raised in song.

"Hello, Placer!" Jeremiah shouted. "I've got a lot of coyotes corralled in here. Watch the door, will you, and shoot the first one that tries to break out!"

The giant was heard to give a snort of surprise, and a moment later he poked his head cautiously through the door, shoving a big, navy revolver in front of him.

"Which one shall I plug first?" he questioned, when he understood the situation.

"Get some rope and tie them, Placer!" the cowboy commanded. "I'll hold them with these little tools, while you hunt the rope."

For reply, the giant pulled his *riata* from the saddle of his horse, which was standing near the door, and whipping out a big bowie, began to cut the *riata* into short lengths.

"Hate to waste such good material on such worthless skunks!" he growled. "But you're the boss of the drive to-day, an' hyer it goes."

Curly and his pals were wriggling and twisting, hoping against hope that something would turn up to let them out of their humiliating position. Yet they offered no resistance when Placer proceeded to tie them, believing that death would follow should they make trouble now.

Within five minutes from the time of Placer's coming, they were standing in a row against the wall, bound hand and foot, cowed, sheepish, crestfallen, and as miserable-looking a set of herders as was ever seen.

They had come for wool and got shorn in a way most beautiful to behold, and Jolly Jeremiah enjoyed the situation hugely.

CHAPTER VII. CUPID'S ARROW.

THE men who had been with Placer on the range that day, and who had been delayed by some trivial incident, now appeared upon the scene, and being admitted to the bunk-room, stared with undisguised amazement at the row of bound figures along the wall.

"They tried to do up our good-natured friend hyer," Placer hastily explained; and then told the story of the attempted outrage, as he had received it from Jeremiah's lips.

The cowboys were all warm friends of Placer and Jeremiah, and as they listened to the story, and were made aware of the dastardly plot which it had been the intention of Curly's men to carry out, their indignation broke all bounds. Had it not been for the restraining influence of Jeremiah, they would have given the rascals a taste of the medicine prepared for the jolly cowboy.

As it was, they made Curly sign a written statement of the causes which had actuated him; and then, with a solemn warning, released him and his humiliated tools, and told them to go about their business, and to beware how they attempted any such humorous tricks again.

Glad enough were the scoundrels to escape so easily; for, considering the character of their offense, they anticipated only the severest and most degrading punishment.

Of course they carried the news to their cronies; and through Gaston, an exaggerated and unfavorable account came to the ears of Madge Farrington.

In consequence of this, Jeremiah found himself summoned to appear before that lady, the following morning, to answer to the part he had taken in the affair, for Gaston had made her think him the chief offender.

"What is this I hear concerning you, Mr. Jackson?" she demanded, when Jeremiah had responded to her summons.

There was a heightened color in her face, and through anger or suppressed excitement her eyes shone like jewels. Jeremiah, likely to be misjudged as he feared, could not resist the spell of her wondrous beauty; and the threatening arrow, which had for some time been apparently entangled on the bow-string of the coy little archer, was driven home.

The confused cowboy flushed and stammered, became hot and cold by turns, and found himself unable to say a word.

"I understand that you and Placer, with some others, took Curly and his friends unawares, in the bunk-room, tied them up and submitted them to all sorts of indignities."

"Which is not true, Miss Farrington. You are mistaken. I—I mean to say, y—you have been misinformed!" the poor fellow stammered, shifting uneasily under her glance.

"You held them with a pistol, while Placer tied them up, did you not?"

"But we had abundant cause!" he protested.

"No one *can* have cause to treat any of my men that way!" she declared, imperiously. "You must understand that, Mr. Jackson. Such ungentlemanly conduct cannot be permitted on this ranch."

His face burned with humiliation.

"If I could only make you understand just how it was!"

"An explanation is not necessary. I have heard the entire story. I only wanted to tell you that such conduct will not be permitted."

With a wave of the hand, she dismissed him, and he stumbled blindly through the door, cursing himself for his stupidity, and telling himself at the same time that he had never beheld so lovely a creature as this imperious ranch queen.

"I don't deserve any better treatment at her hands!" he asserted, as he stood once more in the open air. "I really haven't enough sense to get around with. To become as tongue-tied as a wooden image, and sit there like a bump on a log, when a few words well spoken would have taken me nicely through the snarl! Jeremiah Jackson, you ought to go and butt your few brains out against the walls of one of the bunk-houses!"

In this self-accusing mood, he walked slowly toward the store, scarcely knowing which way he was going, and caring less.

He was aroused by a hearty hail from Frank.

"What's the matter, now, Jeremiah? You look as grumpy as an eel out of water! And after getting away with those fellows so beautifully last night! Placer has told me all about it. Fie! Fie! We'll have to take away your title of 'Jolly,' and give it to some one more deserving." "I wish to heaven you would!" Jeremiah growled.

"Come! What's the matter? I've heard Placer's version of the affair. Step into the store and give me yours. I haven't been as much interested in anything for an age."

"If the Fool-killer has reported for duty this morning, tell him his services are pressingly demanded by a fellow of about my size, will you?" and Jeremiah, his arm having been grasped by young Farrington, suffered himself to be led into the room.

"I'm certain if any man deserves to be knocked on the head for idiocy, it's me! Some one, Gaston I presume, gave Madge a distorted account of the affair, and when she summoned me to answer for the part I had taken, I took my scolding without saying a word."

"A fool you are, then!" giving him a strange and comprehensive look. "Haven't been drinking anything to upset you so?"

There was a mischievous twinkle in the young man's eyes, for he knew full well that Jeremiah was not a drinking man.

Then, by easy stages, he drew the humiliated and disheartened cowboy on to a recital of the events of the previous night and a minute account of what had passed between him and Miss Farrington that morning.

"Madge does have a crushing way about her!" he observed, discreetly. "She rattles the best of 'em when she gets on her high horse and goes into the lecture business. I've known Placer to wilt like a collar at a Fourth of July sweating bee."

Jeremiah gave him a grateful glance.

"I think I know how to handle her, though. I'll straighten this thing out, or I'm a double-headed Dutchman! See if I don't! If it wasn't for that infernal Gaston, I could count on Pearl's assistance. But he's got her so blinded that she can't tell white from black any more when she sees it."

Jeremiah protested that he must attempt nothing of the kind, but the young man was obdurate.

"Right is right, you see! And it would be far from right to let Madge remain in ignorance of the true state of affairs. I'm bound to tell her, if not for your sake, then for the sake of Placer and the rest of the boys. She'll come down as soon as she understands how matters really are, for there isn't a better-hearted woman in the world than Madge. And you may rest assured that I'll see she gets the story straight."

"I've been watching Gaston, as you told me to, and I know you're correct in your estimate of the fellow. He's a scoundrel, if there ever

was one, and this is only another proof of it. I wish Pearl would bounce him, or he'd go away from here, or that his horse would tumble and break the rascal's leg or neck. Anything, so he wouldn't be always hanging around the store. I never liked the fellow very well, and the more I see of him the less that liking grows."

"It would have been a jolly go, if he had been with Curly's crowd. It would have tickled me so, I should have been inclined to donate a quarter's cancellation of the post-office—five dollars more or less—to purposes of charity, or for the benefit of the heathen of New York City."

He was rattling on at this rate, when, with a final protest, Jeremiah took his departure.

CHAPTER VII. IN A FIT OF PIQUE.

THE account which Frank hastened to give to Madge did not have the effect on that lady which the ardent youth had imagined it would.

She had seen Jolly Jeremiah emerge from the store; and when her brother proceeded to enlighten her further upon the subject, giving his narrative a decided twist in favor of the cowboy, she immediately jumped to the conclusion that the latter had induced Frank to intercede in his behalf.

Further than this, Frank, in his ingenuous artlessness, dilated strongly on the supposed rivalry for the foremanship which rumor said existed between Jeremiah and Gaston; and gave that as one of the reasons why Curly's men had attacked the former.

"I don't really suppose Jeremiah wants to be foreman," Frank had asserted. "But if there is any one on this ranch who is capable of assuming the place, and doing justice to it, that man is Jeremiah Jackson."

"A great friend of yours, I see. I presume you are not to be paid anything for pleading his cause so eloquently?" with a smile and a quick glance. "You deserve something, I am sure."

Frank reddened; and, when he went away, having performed his self-imposed mission very clumsily, he left the impression firmly fixed in his sister's mind that Jeremiah was ambitious for the honors of the foremanship, and that the whole trouble had grown out of that.

"He's presuming altogether too much!" she pouted. "He's a nice fellow, in many respects, but it will do him good, I think, to take him down a peg or two!"

Then, in a fit of pique, she summoned Gaston, who had never done an hour's work on the ranch, and appointed him to the position of assistant foreman, retaining the coveted place herself.

When Jeremiah heard of it he smiled grimly, but kept his thoughts locked in his own breast. Not so with Placer Jim, who became as angry thereat as a blustering turkey cock at the shaking of a red rag.

Out of the feeling thus engendered grew a strange rivalry—a rivalry for the foremanship of the coming round-up, in which the principals, Gaston and Jolly Jeremiah, seemed to take no part nor interest. The seeming was real on the part of Jeremiah, who had a no wish to occupy the position; but on the part of Gaston it was only seeming. He longed for the place, not for the honor it would confer, but for the power and influence it would give into his hands.

As the round-up was almost at hand, new men were being added to the ranch force. Placer led the fight on behalf of his friend, Jeremiah, and Curly on behalf of Gaston; and whenever a new man put in an appearance he was besieged by these two worthies, and given no rest until he had committed himself to one side or the other.

While this singular contest was raging most fiercely, the people of the Double Dagger were startled by another stage robbery. The south-bound mail stage, heavily loaded with passengers, more than half of whom were U. S. troopers in disguise, had been held up on the open plains, near the Double Dagger ranch, and robbed.

The troopers, who were raw recruits, had become panic-stricken when the fierce robber band streamed from the shadows and the darkness, and surrounded the stage with gleaming rifles. Their leader tried to rally them to a resistance, but received a bullet for his pains; and the others ranged themselves in line at the word of command, and lifted their hands heavenward as meekly as if they had never thought of making a stand. And when the stage again bore them onward, they were minus their bayoneted muskets, their shining Colts, and their belted cartridge-boxes, which the road-agents had greedily seized on as legitimate spoils of war.

When the report reached the Double Dagger, Jolly Jeremiah and Placer Jim immediately organized the cowboys, or such of them as they could trust, and took the trail in pursuit of the daring rascals. The soldiers having recovered somewhat from their fright, now that the exciting cause was vanishing on the swiftest horse-flesh procurable, offered their services to Placer. But as they were unarmed, the offer was declined, no doubt to the troopers' great relief.

Day was beginning to break feebly, when the point at which the outrage had been committed was gained. But there was sufficient light to make the trail discernible. The best trailers were placed in the lead, and the chase began with vigor and earnestness.

There was a stretch of broken, gully-filled country, ten or twelve miles distant, and it was at once evident the outlaws were making for that, hoping to baffle pursuit, should any be made, amid the rugged and rocky defiles.

When the sun was high enough to enable them to look ahead, they were chagrined by the discovery that the road-agents had already gained the defiles. This greatly complicated matters, for should the rascals have time to separate and thoroughly conceal themselves, the chances of running them to earth would be greatly lessened.

They found, when the broken country was gained, that the robbers had separated into bands of twos and threes. This compelled the pursuers to do likewise. One of the hardest and flintiest of the trails was taken up by Jeremiah and Placer Jim; and, when instructions had been given to the others, and a common rendezvous appointed, they urged their horses along this trail at the best gait possible.

At first, so mixed together and dim were the hoof-prints, they could not determine the exact number they were following. But the trail touching softer ground at one point, they discovered that only two fleeing men were represented by it.

There was not a better trailer in the West than Placer Jim. He had lived all his life on the border; having gained his appellation in the placer diggings of the early California days. He had trailed road-agents and savages on the plains and in the mountains; and was still as keen of eye as a youth of sixteen.

Suddenly, on rounding a bend, they beheld their quarry. The outlaws had evidently stopped to rest, and been concealed in a bushy glen, where sand plums and dwarf elms had found a precarious footing. On seeing their pursuers they dashed from their temporary hiding-place. One of them wheeled in his saddle and sent a shower of pistol-balls perilously near their trackers; which act was responded to by Placer in a hearty way.

"I cut purty clost to them scoundrels, if I didn't hit 'em!" he exclaimed, grimly, digging his big spurs against the flanks of his pony, a movement which Jeremiah imitated.

The outlaws had vanished almost instantly around a bend. There they had separated, as Placer found on arriving at the spot.

"We'll have to do the same," and Jeremiah smiled grimly. "We have the best horses, I think, and are crowding them too close to suit their thieving majesties. They'll lay for us, likely, and if we aren't extra cautious they'll bring us down. Well, good-by, if we should never see each other again!"

He pressed the horny hand of the black-bearded giant, and without another word turned up one of the narrow defiles.

Placer, with a parting wave of his hand, took the other trail, and pushed his horse mercilessly. Scanning the ground closely, he began to discover here and there tell-tale drops of blood, showing that one of his bullets had taken effect, or that the hunted man had been previously wounded and his hurts were beginning to bleed afresh.

After almost an hour's hard riding, in momentary expectation of a shot from ambush, he again came in sight of the outlaw's horse. The animal was standing by the side of the trail, with head drooped and evidently greatly exhausted.

Placer could not understand the situation. If the road-agent were lying in wait for him, he would surely take pains to keep the animal concealed as well as himself.

Puzzled and fearful of treachery he dismounted, tied his steed in an angle of the wall, and, taking a circuitous route, advanced toward the point where the outlaw's horse was standing, creeping from rock to rock and keeping himself as well screened as the nature of the ground would permit.

On reaching a commanding position, he saw

the road-agent lying prone on the ground, either dead or dying. Appearances indicated that he had fallen from his horse through sheer weakness and loss of blood; and as the astonished cowboy looked and stared he saw a crimson pool at the man's side.

Instantly all thought of enmity left the heart of Placer Jim. The outlaw became only a brother, suffering and in distress. He had not come out to fight a helpless man, outlaw though he be.

Leaving his place of concealment, he bounded down the rocky slope, and soon stood at the side of the wounded man, for he quickly perceived that the road-agent was not dead. As he looked into the latter's face, and noticed the filmy eye which indicated approaching dissolution, he started back with a cry of astonishment. The dying man was a cowboy from a neighboring ranch, and was well-known to him.

"Is it you, Placer?" the poor fellow questioned, staring upward and feebly attempting to lift his head. "I'm a goner, Placer! I've got it at last!"

He placed a palm on the wound in his side from which the blood was still freely flowing. It had been bandaged, but the crimson tide had soaked through the strips of torn clothing, and bathed his body in gore.

"What does this mean, Sandy?" Placer cried, bending down and trying to stanch the flow. "I'd 'a' never shot at ye, in the world, if I'd 'a' had any sort o' idee it was you!"

"Twa'n't you, Placer, as did it!" Sandy groaned. "'Twas one o' them sogers. One of 'em shot me an' I plugged him back, afore we could corral 'em. That's why we stopped back thar awhile ago, when you come onto us. I was bleedin' powerful; an' we stopped to fix the bandages."

He paused, and lay so still and white that Placer thought he had breathed his last.

"Didn't expect to see me, I reckon!" opening his eyes, after a bit. "I'm done for, Placer, an' I want to make a clean breast while I kin. Mebbe I'll stan' a better show, then, 'fore the Foreman o' the Big Ranch up thar!" and he turned his failing glance heavenward.

"It's a little comfort to think that He knows us an' jedges us more mercifully than men do. You recollect He saved the dyin' thief, Placer; an' that's what I am. A dyin' thief!"

He clasped his hands as if in prayer; and Placer, kneeling by his side, felt the softening tears flow down his own face.

"I've been a hard 'un, Placer, an' a sneak into the barg'in; fer while you thought me the clean an' white article I was a thief an' a road-agent. I never had much show, though, to be anything else, an' mebbe He'll figger that into the pay-roll to my account. I hopes an' prays He will, for thar's a terrible sight o' black figgers on t'other side the sheet."

"I knows He will!" Placer groaned. "He will, if ye ask Him strong an' earnest. I heard a parson say onc't that we'd be jedge'd lovin'ly, an' a'cordin' to our chances."

Sandy smiled tranquilly, apparently much comforted.

"I'm a-goin' fast, an' mus' say what I've got to say quick. I don't want to bring any other fellers to sorer an' misery, but it's pressin' hard on me that I mus' make a clean breast. Thar's a lot o' 'em into the bizness, an' I knows it 'ud be better fer 'em when they come to this, if they was driv' outen it now."

Then, laboredly and in husky tones, he named the men of the various ranches who were members of the road-agent organization, stating that Curly and his followers were among the most prominent, and that the chief of the band was none other than Captain Philip Gaston.

Placer listened with feelings of surprise and pain.

When the confession had ended, Sandy clasped his hands across his breast, fixed his filmy eyes on the blue arch above him, and passed calmly into that sleep which, on this earth, knows no awakening.

CHAPTER VIII.

BACK TO THE RANCH.

FOR a few moments Placer Jim stood sorrowfully above the dead road-agent, much troubled in mind, and uncertain what to do. The man's confession had grieved, while it astonished him; and now that the task of re-telling the condemnatory story had fallen on him, he was much exercised, fearing it would be thought a concocted yarn, designed to injure his enemy, Curly.

If only others had been present to hear the confession.

"I'll haf to see Jeremiah, fu'st!" he concluded,

speaking his thoughts aloud. "Mebbe he kin say what I'd best do. I know, though, that it'll be thought I made the hull thing up out o' my own head. Law! Law! To think of it! Gaston the king-pin o' the hull caboodle! I knowed he was a p'ison dog; but that jist lays me clean out."

He scratched his head in momentary uncertainty, then drew a dirty, red handkerchief from one of his pockets, fastened it to a stick, and planted the stick in a crevice by the dead man's side.

"I low that'll keep away the coyotes fer awhile. If he was a road-agent, he was whiter'n most o' 'em; an' we'll want to take him home an' bury him in proper style."

He then tethered the outlaw's horse to a neighboring bush, and walked abstractedly up the trail to where he had left his own steed. A little later he was spurring on the backward track.

When he reached the point where the trails divided he followed the one taken by Jolly Jeremiah; and a half-hour later saw that individual returning, apparently jaded, dejected, and unsuccessful in his quest.

The latter saw at a glance that Placer was bubbling over with unuttered information.

"What is it?" he queried. "You didn't get your man?"

The smile faded from his face as Placer hurriedly communicated his surprising bit of intelligence.

"I've known it all along," the cowboy asserted. "Not in so positive a way, but sufficiently positive to convince me. As you say, though, if we tell it, it will be thought a scheme of ours to injure Gaston and Curly. It's a great pity the other boys were not along to hear what Sandy said."

Placer was almost as surprised by the fact that Jeremiah had previously guessed the truth as he had been by Sandy's confession. For himself, he had never dreamed of such a thing, though he had long been convinced that Gaston and Curly were vile enough to commit any offense.

"I won't feel 'at I'm a-doin' right by Sandy, unless I say somethin' about the thing!" Placer Jim uneasily exclaimed.

"Well, you've told me, Placer. That will do for the present. I hope the time will soon come when you'll be at liberty to tell it to all the world. That time will not be so very long delayed, or I greatly miss my guess. Events have been rushing toward it at race-horse speed lately."

He then proceeded to tell Placer about the robbery of the safe at the Double Dagger store.

Sandy's story, you see, makes it reasonably certain that that robbery was committed by members of this same band; and by whom so likely as Gaston himself, assisted perhaps by Curly. This raid on the stage is not their last one, take my word for that. They've been at it a good while, and never been caught, or even suspected until recently. What is there to induce them to stop their work. Absolutely nothing, for they have little to fear from the few troops which are from time to time sent against them. It may even be that some of the troops are their allies, and that they are given warning when to expect them."

They had been jogging along in the direction of the rendezvous as they talked.

When they reached it, many of the cowboys were already gathered there, and listened with unfeigned astonishment to the story that Placer had to tell. He did not inform them of the fact that Sandy was still alive when he came up with him, nor of the latter's confession. On these points he was discreetly silent. But the discovery that Sandy, a cowboy well known to them all, was a member of the bloodthirsty band they had been chasing, was surprise enough for one day.

It had such a suspicious look also—for the reflection naturally came that if one cowboy was implicated others might be—that they could not resist staring at each other in a dubious way, and wondering who would be the next to be revealed as a traitor and a scoundrel.

None of them, with the single exception of Placer Jim, had come up with a man of the pursued party, and when all were gathered, they turned upon the back track, and, under the black giant's guidance, rode away to the point where Sandy's body was lying.

The handkerchief was still fluttering, as Placer had left it, and the riderless horse neighed shrilly at the end of his tether when they came in sight.

The body had not been disturbed by bird nor beast; but lay with sightless eyes staring skyward as they gathered about it.

For a few minutes they stood silently, or hovered about, speaking in the low tones men involuntarily use when in the presence of the great mystery, Death. Then they slung some blankets between two of the ponies, deposited the body gently thereon, covered it from sight, and took their solemn way homeward.

It was noon when the ranch was gained, and their appearance with the body of Sandy created a decided commotion. A thousand questions were asked and repeated, but Placer guarded his secret well, and told only the portion of the story which he had previously revealed to the cowboys of the pursuing party.

Gaston looked and questioned among the rest, his dark face revealing nothing of his secret thoughts. Not for a moment did his customary coolness desert him. A slight pallor gathered for an instant in Curly's face, but it passed almost as quickly as it had come, and from thenceforth he stood the ordeal equally as well as his chief.

Jeremiah and Placer watched for some indications of guilt, and once or twice felt that they discovered them; but if such indications there were they were too slight to attract any attention from eyes not sharpened by a knowledge of the truth.

"I had some hope they might do or say something to call the suspicions of the crowd to them," Jeremiah said in an aside to his big chum. "But they're too shrewd to do anything like that. I've been watching Gaston's face, and it has no more expression or feeling in it than if it were an oyster. The man absolutely has no heart, or else is an adept at concealing his throbblings. If you will notice that smile on his face, now, you will see that it has in it about as much warmth as the smile of a stone image."

Placer had noticed it, and said as much.

"If 'twasn't for this confounded jealousy 'tween you an' Gaston, an' 'tween me an' Curly, I'd give the hull thing away this minute. As 'tis, I'm bound to keep my jaws shet, an' see that feller smile an' smile like the keeper of a clothin' shop, an' do nothin' to stop it."

"There is no jealousy between me and Gaston," and the jolly cowboy's laughter broke through like a rift of sunlight, in spite of the time and the occasion. "That's all imagination on your part, and on the part of some others. Perhaps Gaston wants to be foreman, but I assure you I don't. My sole ambition is to get him by the hip, for the little tragedy and comedy he has been playing. I'll do it, too, if I'm given time enough."

"A great pity, isn't it, that he should be able to deceive Pearl the way he has?"

"An' Miss Madge!" Placer interjected.

"Yes; and Madge. Though it's Pearl who is likely to suffer most from his villainous scheming. I tell you, Placer, we must never let that love affair get so far along that it cannot be stopped except by the divorce courts. A better girl than Pearl, one more true and tender-hearted, never lived; and it hurts me to see her in the toils of such a scamp."

"Set up the pins fer beatin' him, an' I'll stan' by ye," Placer whispered.

"That I'll do, you may depend on it, if we don't succeed in rounding him up on this other business. I'm not afraid, though, but what we'll get him on that, before the game is played to a finish."

Placer announced that he sincerely hoped they would; and, then, other cowboys joining them, the whispered conversation was brought to an end.

That afternoon, the dead road-agent was taken to the ranch to which he belonged; and the following day was given decent burial at the hands of the men he had so basely deceived. Gaston and Curly, with their tools, were in attendance; but not a word was uttered to show they had more than a passing interest in the dead man's fate.

CHAPTER IX. A STARTLING FIND.

THE Farringtons were not in attendance upon the funeral of Sandy. Almost all the cowboys being away, Madge and Pearl felt it incumbent on them to remain at home, and Frank's duties forced him to be at the post-office on the arrival of the daily mail. Most of the ranch force, together with Jeremiah and Placer Jim, Gaston and Curly, tarried at the neighboring ranch to which the body had been conveyed until after the burial on the following day.

They had arisen in such haste on the morning of the robbery that they had no time to put their coats and the bunk-room to rights, and in the attendant hurry and excitement these duties were overlooked on their return. Hence it came

about that Pearl paid a visit to the bunk-rooms on the morning of the funeral to do this neglected work.

It was a very uncommon thing for her to do, but a very natural thing when all the circumstances are taken into consideration. Being by nature kind-hearted and thoughtful for the good of others, it occurred to her that it would be a pleasant surprise for the men, when they returned tired and weary from their long ride, to find the distasteful work of sweeping out the bunk-rooms and preparing the cots already done.

With a song on her lips, but a pain at her heart for the cowboy who had betrayed his trust and perished so miserably, she went out to the bunk-houses and began her self-imposed task. She looked as fair and sweet as a lily, in her neat calico working-dress and gingham apron, with a kerchief bound turban fashion about her abundant, brown hair.

She was the complete complement of her dark-haired and dark-eyed sister, who had more tact, discernment, business genius and graciousness, but who could not be more sweet and lovable.

When the rooms had been made as clean as pains-taking sweeping could make them, she turned her attention to the cots arranged along the walls. These needed airing, and as she gathered up the bed-clothing and pillows, a half dozen gold chains, a watch and a small bundle of letters were exposed.

She started, for the articles were beneath the pillow of Jolly Jeremiah's cot, and the letters, as a glance showed, were directed to herself and Madge.

For a moment she stood, with the pillows in her arms, spellbound and stupefied by the awful suggestion which that vision conjured up.

The letters had evidently been opened and read, for the ends of the envelopes were torn off.

"Oh, dear!" she gasped. "What can this mean? What are those letters doing here? And that watch and those chains! It's very strange! I must call Madge!"

In every moment of uncertainty and distress Madge was her refuge and her tower of strength. Without her stronger sister she felt lost in times of trial and perplexity. Madge, with her clear head and ready wit, could make crooked paths straight, and face lions of doubt and difficulty; and where Pearl was won't to stray with dubious gait, Madge walked with a decisive and firm step.

Dropping the bundle of pillows upon the nearest cot, she hastened to the house to confer with Madge regarding this startling find.

"And they were under Jeremiah's pillow?"

Madge questioned, with whitening lips, as she listened to Pearl's story of the discovered articles. "You are sure of that?"

"I haven't disturbed them," Pearl asserted. "Come and see for yourself. I can't imagine what it means. Surely—surely—" and she wrung her hands in a distressed way.

"Let us not jump at conclusions!" said Madge, very white, but very calmly and composedly. "I'll go with you."

She hastily tied her bonnet-strings beneath her chin; and, closing the door after her, left the house with Madge.

"Let's call Frank!" she suggested, as they were passing near the store.

She was evidently fighting the hideous suggestions which were constantly arising in her mind, and hoping that something would occur to explain away the discovery. Frank was fertile of resources, and might be able to give valuable suggestions, or even account for the presence of the articles in that particular place.

His face was eloquently expressive of astonishment and indignation, when the news had been communicated to him.

"It's a trick!" he asserted. "Jeremiah never put them there!"

Madge gave him a grateful look.

"Some one has done it, hoping they would be found, to his disgrace and injury. Do you suppose they were taken from the mail stage at the time of the robbery?"

"I'm sure I don't know!" Pearl fluttered. "It looks very much that way."

"Thieves are getting to be altogether too plentiful here," locking the store door after him and placing the key in his pocket. "If it keeps up, we'll have to call on Judge Lynch."

He really had no thoughts of invoking the aid of the unreliable and eccentric judge, but he was annoyed beyond measure, and chose to express himself in that irritable way.

When the bunk-room had been gained and entered, Pearl pointed silently to the accusing articles lying exposed to view by the removal of the pillow.

"It has a bad look, that's a fact!" and Frank dubiously shook his head. "I never expected to find anything of the kind in this bunk-house, and especially under that pillow. But," with a sigh, "we ought to be prepared for anything, since the death of Sandy. No one would have dreamed that he belonged to the road-agent band; and, yet, his death proves him to have been a member. There is no telling but what this ranch may be harboring others."

Madge was examining the letters disclosed, and looking at the watch and chains.

"These letters must have been in the mail that was robbed. The dates and post-marks show that. And I suppose this watch and the chains were taken from some of the passengers. I don't know what to think or say."

She handed Pearl her letters and glanced through her own to see if there had been any inclosures.

"It looks black," Frank confessed, frowning. "Most awfully black. If I was called on to judge, not knowing anything about the man, I should say that he had taken things from the stage that night, placed them under his pillow, and has forgotten them, or felt secure in the belief that no one would bother his cot."

"It looks reasonable. Every cowboy attends to his own cot, and the chances are that anything placed that way beneath one of the pillows would be as safe as if hid in a Bible. Not one cowboy in a hundred would ever disturb them or even think of looking there."

"Jeremiah has been busy as a bee ever since the robbery, almost; and, if he really put them there, he has postponed hiding them more securely until he should have more leisure. They would have been safe enough, too, if Pearl hadn't taken it into her head, this morning, to do the cowboys a favor."

"May not some one have placed them there, for a purpose, you know?" and Pearl looked up from the letter she was scanning. "It's dreadful to think that Jeremiah may have done it. He has always seemed such a jolly, gentlemanly fellow, so different from the average."

"Always an excuse for some one!" and Frank affected a smile. "One may count on you! I'd been thinking the same thing. I can't think he did it, even though the proof seems so conclusive. What bothers me is, if any one put them there for the purpose of throwing suspicion on him, how would they know the articles would be discovered?"

The query was altogether too much for Pearl.

"I have a certain gentleman in my mind's eye who might do such a thing, if he thought anything was to come of it," giving Pearl a keen look, which the latter, however, did not notice. "For a number of reasons, I won't name him. He might do it, I say, if he thought the thing would be found."

Madge glanced at him inquiringly, but Frank's face gave no hint of the individual suspected.

"You see, as I said before, if Sandy was one of those light-fingered gentlemen who have been bothering us so much of late, it isn't unreasonable to suppose that others of the same stripe may be on this ranch. In fact, I am pretty certain some of them are; though I wouldn't mention names, now."

"If that is so, might not these fellows have done this, as Pearl has suggested? I have mentioned the only objection to the theory."

"Let me think over it awhile," said Madge, placing a hand to her forehead. "Bring all the things into the house, Pearl, and say nothing about the matter until I have come to some decision."

Then, with an agitation which plainly betrayed itself, she walked slowly and thoughtfully to the house.

CHAPTER X.

A WOMAN'S HEART.

AN hour later, she emerged from her seclusion, and bent her steps toward the little store room.

It had been an hour of self-questioning, doubt and distrust. Distrust of her own self, and doubt as to the course she should pursue. It had also held for her more of distress than any similar period within her recollection. The fear that Jeremiah might really be as guilty as circumstances seemed to indicate had touched and stung her strangely.

She immediately cast the fear aside, however, as an unworthy one, which did gross injustice to an honorable man; for, amid all her self-communings, the one belief rose like a rock from a stormy sea; the belief, ay, the conviction, that the jolly cowboy was as true to the right as the needle to the pole star.

Why, then, had she raised Philip Gaston to the second position within her gift, and by doing so snubbed the man in whom she so strongly believed? She could find no adequate answer to her own question.

It is possible the reader may have some inkling of the truth.

Beaten back into the most hidden recesses of her heart, smothered, denied and concealed from her own self, was a spark of that fire which our first parents plucked from the skies when the world was young. The fire of true love.

And there it smoldered, refusing to die.

Madge denied this to herself, as she would have denied it to the world. She realized that she felt a strange interest in this cowboy, who had come among them, friendless and unknown, and with no other recommendation than a bright and pleasant face and a perennial cheeriness of manner.

She felt convinced that he was no ordinary cowboy, and wondered often what had caused him to adopt so wild and rough a life, when his evident education fitted him for something higher and better. And, in their conversations, she had been piqued many times because he did not reveal the secret which she felt must lie around his past.

The reason for her singular interest, she told herself, was because he was so different from the ordinary run of cowboys; because of his bland cheeriness and his bright face; because of the mystery that clung about him; because of—she knew not what—but love was not admitted to the category.

In this stress of mind she had labored on the problem presented by the finding of the articles under the pillow in the bunk-room until her head ached and her ideas almost refused to flow; and the conclusions she had reached were so unstable and inconclusive that she placed little reliance in them.

Only of one thing was she assured: Jolly Jeremiah, in spite of appearances, was innocent of the crimes of robbery and treachery thus seemingly laid at his door.

Ordinarily she felt strong enough to work out her conclusions without the aid of another; now she sought Frank, for solace and relief from her thoughts as much as for assistance.

She felt comforted, on entering the store-room, to notice that her brother's face wore a look that must be nearly allied to the expression on her own. The troublesome affair had also been harassing him.

"Made anything out of the muddle?" he asked, as she advanced to the desk where he was standing. "Hanged if I can! It seems the fellow is guilty, from the evidence, but I don't believe a word of it."

"I am glad!" in a tone so thankful and fervent that Frank was almost startled.

"Glad I didn't convict him without a trial, eh? Well, I did come mighty near it, I'm afraid, at first."

He smiled up at her in a way to suggest he more than half-guessed the true state of her heart.

"The point before the court is, what are we going to do?"

"I hoped you might be able to suggest."

Frank scratched his curly head in perplexity. It was not Madge's habit to thrust responsibilities on his young shoulders, and he felt unequal to the sudden emergency.

"S'pose I ride out to meet him on his return and tell him all about it? How'd that do? He isn't guilty, I know, and maybe he can clear up the thing."

Frank was thinking of the mysterious robbery of the safe, which secret, because of Jeremiah's injunction, he had not yet committed to his sister. The secret was easily kept, for the amount stolen was small; and, though the keeping of it had so far resulted in nothing, the talk on the morning of the robbery had given him a high opinion of Jeremiah's shrewdness and sagacity.

"Just as you say," she replied, willing to adopt any plan, since all her own seemed worthless. "If you really think that's the best, I'm satisfied for you to try it. I've thought and thought until my head throbs as if it would split, and I can't decide on anything."

Frank did not give her time to change her sudden mood, but hurried from the store and, mounted on a fast horse, was soon speeding in the direction from which he expected Jeremiah to come.

He did not maintain the swift gait for any great distance, however; and when a mile from the ranch drew the horse down into a sober walk.

"No use hurrying," he cogitated. "I'm too

far for Madge to recall me, if she should take a sudden notion to do so. And, in her present mood, she would have done that, ten chances to one, if I had loitered around long enough to give her time. She's a queer girl, at times, Madge is."

He looked quizzically at his horse's ears, as he gave expression to the thought, and his expressive eyes took on the look they had worn when he glanced up at his sister in the store in that suggestive way.

"Well, he's a nice fellow, if he is only a cowboy, and I more than half hope I'm right about it. Heigh-ho!" and he looked off over the smooth expanse in the direction from which the cowboys were to return.

"Nearly noon," he said, looking at his watch. "They're on their way, I suppose, for the funeral was to be at ten. Well, I've got plenty of time, as the other mail won't be in till four o'clock."

A half-hour later, a dust-cloud on the horizon announced that the cowboys were on their way back to the home ranch. Seeing this, Frank again put spurs to his horse.

On meeting the party he was disappointed to find that Jeremiah was not among them. He was on the point of making some inquiry as to the cause, but checked himself and rode on.

"They might guess," he said. "Especially if it is a plot against Jeremiah, and any of them are into it. I wish I had told Madge to say nothing about it till I came back."

An hour later he encountered Placer Jim and Jeremiah, who, for some reason, had remained at the ranch after the others had departed.

"I've something to say to you," Frank observed to Jeremiah, after greetings had been exchanged, at the same time casting a questioning glance at Placer Jim.

"That's all right," Jeremiah replied, comprehending the meaning of the glance. "Placer and I understand each other pretty well, now, and there's no necessity for keeping anything from him."

Thus reassured, Frank told of the discovery of the morning, and of his talk with Madge.

The jolly cowboy was evidently much touched by this mark of Madge's good will and friendship.

"I hope I can soon do something to show that your confidence is not misplaced. I think I can, too; for, if I'm not greatly misled, matters are working toward a crisis that will astonish some people."

Then, without further preliminaries, he asked Placer to detail to young Farrington the information revealed in the confession of the dying road-agent.

The robbery of the safe, which was now made known to Placer Jim for the first time, with other events of more recent date, had partially prepared Frank for the disclosures.

"I wish I had told Madge to say nothing about the find till my return," he growled. "She don't suspect that Irishman in the least; and, I'll be bound, will tell him as soon as he gets home."

"It's too late now," Jeremiah remarked, smiling with philosophical cheerfulness. "It would have been better. If the news of the find is spread, and Gaston will be in only too big a hurry to spread it, it will weaken me among the men whom I want to retain as friends. There may even be an attempt to cripple me by bringing about my arrest. Men have been arrested on less grounds."

He rode on for a time in silence, debating what course he should pursue.

"We'll not cross fences till we come to them. Whatever is before me is before me, and I'll meet it like a man."

CHAPTER XI.

A GRATUITOUS INSULT.

ON arriving at the Double Dagger and mingling with the men, Jolly Jeremiah was agreeably disappointed to find that no rumor of the discovery of the stolen articles had been spread abroad. Matters were as they had been before the robbery; and the cowboys soon dropped into the old routine, his special friends clinging to him as closely as ever, and Curly and his pals avoiding him in the old way.

Thinking the matter over, he came to the conclusion that he ought to call on Madge and thank her for the discreet silence she had maintained; and, in pursuance of this conclusion, took his way one morning to the ranch-house.

On being admitted into the cozy parlor—the Double Dagger ranch-house, under the control of Madge, resembled a city residence in many of its appointments—he was greeted with a pleasant smile by the ranch queen, who asked

to what she was indebted for the honor of the call.

"I thought you might guess," and Jeremiah shifted uneasily, as his glance met hers. "It's of the finding of the articles in my cot in the bunk-room of which I came to speak. I came to thank you for withholding judgment until it could be determined whether or not I am guilty of the charge apparently laid at my door."

He became reassured as he went on, and, encouraged by her kindly smile, said much more than he had thought of saying when he came to the house.

"The circumstantial evidence is against me, and the discovery could have been greatly turned to my injury. I had no right to expect you to keep silent, and wish to thank you with all my heart for having done so."

"What men are pleased to call a womanly instinct told me you *could not* be guilty!" with a heightening of color as she gave utterance to the words. "Trusting to that instinct, I had a talk with Pearl, and we agreed to say nothing of the circumstance to *any one*."

The emphasis on the words *any one*, said as plainly as spoken language that Captain Philip Gaston was included in the list of those who were to be kept in ignorance of the find.

"Again I thank you!" bowing as he arose to quit the room. "You shall have abundant justification for the course you have pursued, in the near future. I *know* who the guilty parties are, but am not at liberty to reveal their names now. But you shall know soon, and know so certainly that there cannot be the shadow of a doubt."

Then he stepped upon the outer landing, descended the short flight of steps, and passed from her sight, leaving her staring into space in a way that would have puzzled him had he seen it.

Previous interviews with Madge had given as much pain as pleasure. In this the pleasure had been almost wholly unalloyed; and as he walked away, thoughtfully and with bowed head, he went over, in imagination, the conference just closed, and strove to recall the tones of the ranch queen's voice, together with her attitude and manner when she assured him of her faith in his innocence.

He had been heretofore fighting the passion that moved within him and cried aloud for utterance, fighting it as a man will fight who feels that ruin treads upon that passion's heels. Now he gave himself up to the enjoyment of its contemplation, seeking to look no further than the present, and seemingly careless of what the end might be. He knew it was a perilous mood, but he pushed the prospective peril behind him, and reveled in the golden vistas thus suddenly opened to his intoxicated vision.

The suspicion that there might be a road-agent or road-agents in the employment of the Double Dagger, inasmuch as there had been proven to be one on a neighboring ranch, strengthened as the days went by. No other robbery had been committed, but the conclusion was so natural a one that it provoked constant comment, the comment gradually crystallizing the suspicion into a belief.

Jolly Jeremiah was not aware, however, that much of the suspicion was being directed against himself, until informed of the fact by Placer Jim.

"They're a-huntin' fer somebody to lay the thing onto, an' Gaston's men is a-workin' the thing so's it may seem you're one o' the agents. Gaston hain't said nothin' himself, o' course, but he's got Curly an' his chums to waggin' the tongues like wind-driv' thistles, and I'm afraid they'll hurt ye 'mong some o' the lighter-headed of the fellers."

Jeremiah looked grave.

"What does he expect to accomplish by it?"

"Can't say. I'm jist a-givin' you the fac's; you'll have to do the fingerin'. Somethin' scaly, though, I'll warrant."

Thus warned, Jeremiah kept his eyes and ears wide open; and in the course of the day stumbled on many little evidences of the truth of Placer's statement.

The unique rivalry for the foremanship of the round-up also went on apace, Curly and Placer Jim frequently coming to the point of blows in behalf of their respective champions. It seemed taken for granted by the cowboys that Gaston or Jeremiah would certainly be selected; and the wagers began to run high that Gaston would be the successful man, inasmuch as he appeared, because of his recent elevation, to be firmly fixed in the good graces of the ranch queen.

From all this Jeremiah held aloof, though it was known that Gaston was active in his own

interests, mingling more freely and cordially with the cowboys than he had ever done, in his efforts to gain adherents.

One day, while Gaston was standing near the gate of the big corral, conversing in low tones with a group of cronies, Jeremiah passed by and was greeted with a low and irritating hiss.

The insult, uncalled for and gratuitous as it was, stung him to the quick; and, with a swift movement, he turned and looked the scowling cowboys full in the face.

"I thought I heard the hissing of a viper," he averred, trembling with momentary agitation.

"Oh, it was you, was it?" as Gaston flushed under the stare. "I presume, then, you had a cause for it?"

"One who hasn't any more discretion than to hide his stolen plunder under his bunk-pillow shouldn't ask such a question!" with a sneering attempt at bravado, now that he thought himself in for it.

The insulted man turned red and white by turns, then calmed himself by an effort, and dropped his hands carelessly into the pockets of his coat.

"And you dare to make such a charge, you who placed the stolen articles there? For, if you hadn't placed them there, you wouldn't know anything about it."

"Know, then, that I brand you as a liar and a scoundrel!"

"Take your hands off your pistols, and meet me like a man!" said Gaston, driven to desperation by this unexpected fling. "You are a thief, and a member of the band of road-agents. I have said it, and refuse to take it back."

"Certainly!" and Jeremiah smiled with deadly calmness. "I assure you I'm extremely willing to accommodate you. I will even lend you one of these little tools to do me up with. There aren't any better in the West."

His hands came out of his pockets, and in one was a shining derringer.

He knew Gaston would not accept the weapon, but feared treachery should he altogether release his hold on them.

"Thank you!" and Gaston bowed with mock politeness. "You are very kind! I prefer my own weapons, however. That little tool might not work so well for me as for you."

"As you say. I'm not particular. Anything to suit you. Pick your man, step off ten paces, and fire at the word of command. That's fair, I'm sure, for I guess you own all these fellows, and none of them would care to cut the cards to specially suit me."

There was a business-like promptness in the jolly cowboy's methods that was anything but pleasing to the Irishman, who was inwardly trembling at the unexpected result of his insult. He considered himself a good shot, but he had heard something of Jeremiah's readiness with those deadly derringers, and the lightning swiftness with which one had been drawn was not reassuring.

He saw no way, however, to honorably retreat from the quarrel he had so wantonly provoked. Should he back down at that stage of the proceedings, as he was much inclined to, he would lose the influence and respect of these tools, and that he had worked long and hard to gain.

"Which is it?" Jeremiah questioned. "A fight or a crawfish? Time's worth something, even in this country!"

"Fight!" grated the Irishman, the blood receding from his face, as he braced himself for the ordeal.

Then, speaking to one of the men, he drew and cocked his revolver, and began to count off the paces.

At that moment Madge, who had been out for a dash on her favorite pony, galloped into view from behind the concealing bunk houses.

She took in the situation at a glance, and, racing her horse in between the belligerents, cried:

"Fiel Fiel! What does this mean? Mr. Jackson, Mr. Gaston, I'm ashamed of you! Drop those weapons, or leave the ranch instantly!"

Her face flamed with indignation; her queenly form dilated and her nostrils quivered, as she gave the stern command.

Jeremiah was covered with confusion.

"As you say!" he stammered, dropping the derringer back into his pocket. "Your commands are law."

"My wishes should be law, also, to men who respect the honor of the Double Dagger Ranch; and neither of you can be ignorant of the fact that fighting is not tolerated here."

The cowboy bowed his head.

"Promise me that you will drop this matter,

both of you, or I shall be compelled to place you under arrest to keep the peace!"

The color in her face and the glow in her eyes made her divinely beautiful.

"I promise!" was Jeremiah's solemn rejoinder. "I have no excuse to offer, except under trial, my temper got the better of my judgment. It shall not occur again."

Then, as Gaston gave a similar promise, the cowboy walked slowly away, chagrined and mortified beyond measure. He felt degraded in Madge's estimation; and would have given worlds, had he possessed them, to be able to recall the events of the last half-hour.

Gaston's wanton insult still rankled in his breast, however, and added to the uncomfortable feelings which distracted him. It was plain that the Irishman was making headway among the men, or he would never have ventured to openly hiss him and accuse him so boldly of being a member of the road-agent band.

As had become his custom in distress, he carried his wounded pride and his uneasy fears to the big giant, Placer Jim. The latter was thoroughly indignant; and declared that they must beat Gaston for the honors of the round-up foremanship, if they expected to regain their footing and succeed in exposing the cunning knave.

"I think you are right, Placer; though I never could see it that way before. It seemed too much like self-seeking. But if it is placed in the light of a necessity, and I really believe it has reached that point, I am willing to lay by the little pride I have felt on the subject."

"If you only would!" the giant implored. "It will help you most wonderful, gittin' that posish; an' the boys won't be so 'tarnal easy to be led away hy that lying Irishman. It will give you influence, you see; an' wot you say'll have backin' an' weight."

"I'll do it, Placer!" Jeremiah asserted. "Point out the way, and I'll walk therein."

CHAPTER XII.

PLACER JIM'S DISCOVERY.

PLACER JIM, being by instinct something of a night-hawk, was prowling about the ranch at an unseemly early hour, a few mornings later, when his attention was attracted by the sounds of voices in conversation. The voices were subdued; and, coming from the point they did, an angle of a sod wall at one end of the corral, to his aroused imagination they seemed full of the suspicion of mystery.

The stars were still twinkling brightly, for the day had not yet begun to break in the east.

"Wot kin that mean, I wonder?" he whispered, craning his long neck forward.

He forgot that his own prowlings might seem equally suspicious to a casual on-looker; and that others had as much right to be astir at that time as he had.

"Some devilment, I'll be bound!"

He flattened himself to the earth, and writhed forward, passing through the corral and approaching the wall from the opposite side.

As he drew near the wall, the voices became more distinct, and he could now and then make out a word.

"Gaston an' Curly, as I'm a sinner!" he gasped, hugging the ground still more closely. "No good when them two snakes go to puttin' their heads together. Nothin' but p'ison kin come outen a rattler's tooth."

Then the name of Jeremiah floated to him in the same curiosity-inspiring tones, and he again writhed forward, unwilling to lose a sentence of a conversation which might beset full of bad import to his friend.

He at length gained the angle on the opposite side of the wall; and, through a crevice formed by the falling away of a piece of sod, was able to look out on the plotting pair.

They were Gaston and Curly, sure enough, as the faint starlight showed; and they were sitting with heads bent as closely together as the heads of lovers, when the hour grows late and the lamp burns low.

"It must be done!" Gaston was saying, in an argumentative tone. "I've thought the matter over, and there isn't any other way. I don't like the idea any better than you do."

"You see, if we don't do something pretty soon, he will have us by the heels. I think I've sized up the gentleman pretty well, and his presence here means our ruin, unless we down him before he can strike."

"But the young ladies!" Curly protested. "It hadn't been fer you gittin' into that confounded racket with him! They'll spicion somethin' to onc't, ef he sh'n'dn't turn up some mornin'. An' you an' me 'u'd be the very fu'st fellers they'd clap the' peepers onto, too."

There's whar the trouble comes in. Ef't could be done up sly-like, so's no 'un 'u'd have a idee as to who done it, I wouldn't 'bject. But, hang me, ef I like to put my neck into a sling!"

"It's already in, if it is not done; and not only yours, but the necks of all of us. And, my word for it, we'll feel the rope tighten before we expect it. The trouble with you, Curly, is that you don't want to do the job."

"Well, I hain't 'specially bankerin' for the honor!" the rascal confessed. "The chap's too plaguey handy with them blame derringers to make the venture healthy. 'Pears to me you might undertake it. Ye c'u'd make up fer the pistol-shot you didn't git to give him the 't'her day."

Gaston gave a low chuckle to hide his annoyance. Instead of taking the bait thus deftly thrown, he again began to insist on the great importance of having the "work" done promptly.

"Every minute he's allowed to go around, the whole band is in jeopardy. We come mighty nigh getting it the other time, for I believe he had those soldiers placed in the stage that night, having discovered in some way that we intended to make a raid. If the men had had as much grit as their captain they'd have laid out more than Sandy, I can tell you."

"We may not fare so well, next time."

"Ef you'd 'a' be'n along with us that night mebbe Sandy wouldn't 'a' got it!" and Curly's tones held something of a discontented growl.

"It seems to me you're inclined to be uncommonly ugly to-night, Curly, and without any good reason. If you men don't want to obey my orders, all you have to do is to say so, and I'll take myself off and see how you get along with your own contriving. I'll warrant you'd be rounded up in less than a month."

The implied threat silenced the man.

"If I had been with you that night," making the most of his sudden advantage, "it would have been likely to create suspicion; for, when the news of the fight and robbery came, I would have been found absent. As it was, I rolled placidly out of my bed, with that young fool, Frank, and no one thought of connecting me with the raid."

"If I do the head-work for the band, the rest of you ought to be willing to bear the brunt of work. Of course I could have pretended absence on good grounds, just as you fellows claimed to be out on the range. But I didn't choose to, Curly, and I hope you will not intimate again that I had anything to do with bringing about Sandy's death. It was all the work of that hot-headed captain; and if you had done him justice you would have slain him in his tracks for it. It would have taught others to beware of rousing the dare-devil spirit of the band."

"How'm I to git at Jeremiah?" said Curly, somewhat softened.

"Put a knife into his back some dark night, if nothing better offers. I may be able to find a way that will throw suspicion on some one else. All I want, now, is to know if you'll undertake the work. Agree to that, and I'll prepare the plans."

Placer Jim breathed very hard and clutched his revolver convulsively, as the heartless question was propounded. More than once the temptation had been strong on him to rush upon the plotting scoundrels, and lay about him in a way to produce a couple of broken heads if nothing else. But he had learned self-control of his pard, Jeremiah, and checked the impulse.

"I b'lieve I could capter them fore they'd know what was onto 'em," he declared, in mental self-communion. "If I'd jump onto 'em from the top o' that wall, they'd be skeered nighabout into fits anyhow."

But he reflected that if he did so, and should succeed in taking them, he would have no proof save his unsupported word to warrant their being held; and Gaston's word was likely to go as far as his own. The effort would be twisted against him. He would be made to seem the guilty party; and Jeremiah would perhaps be involved, from the fact that these men were his well-known enemies and Placer his special friend.

"No, 'twon't do!" and Placer ground his teeth impotently. "It do hurt me, though, to hear a pair o' rattlers singin' away like that, an' me not be able to put my heel on the' heads. Makes me feel that life air nighabout a failure."

Curly, who had been sitting for a few moments with his head bowed in thought, began to speak again, and Placer was once more all ears and attention.

"I s'pose I'll have to agree to it, though I don't mind sayin' I don't like the job a bit. Ef

you'll do the plannin', and stan' by me good an' strong, I'll lay the feller out er make a balk in the tryin'."

"No balk; but I'll stand by you to the last. You may depend on that. I couldn't afford to do otherwise, you see."

Curly did not see, but he bowed his head in the affirmative.

"I ought to have done the fellow up the other evening, in spite of Madge's orders," with an air of boasting.

"Ef ye c'd!"

"I could have done it, I assure you. Blast him! He crosses my trail at every turn. He's worked into the confidence of that young fool of a Frank, and has completely poisoned the young scamp against me."

The tone was so bitter that Curly looked up in astonishment.

"Struck ye hard! Must be somethin' wuss'n turnin' Frank ag'in' ye, then!"

The cowboy was a good judge of the motives that moved his master; and comprehended Gaston's devious thoughts better than the latter ever suspected.

"What do you mean by that, Curly?" with an ominous growl.

"I dunno as I mean anything much."

"Yes, you did. Your words showed it. You meant that he must be influencing Madge and Pearl against me. I understood you. Well, he has; and I'd like to have his heart's blood for it. Frank is so taken up with the scoundrel he can't see any harm in anything he does, and defends him against everybody."

"And, thinking that way, he has managed to communicate some of the poison to Pearl. She was as wax in my hands, once, and now she—she—I can't do anything with her."

"Hain't bounced ye?" and there was a suggestion of humor in the way the query was propounded.

"No; that is, not exactly. She seems to be turning, though, toward this infernal Jeremiah."

"Ye'r off there, pardner! Pearl ain't doin' nothin' o' the kind. But, blast my eyes, ef I don't believe the young missus is. I do b'lieve she's a-gittin' to the pint that ef he sh'd take a notion to shine up to her she'd tumble right plump into his arms, same's a sand plum drops outen a tree when ye shake it."

"You make use of your eyes, Curly, I observe! I wonder you didn't look a little further and notice that he has taken a notion to shine up to her, as you so admirably put it. And there's where the trouble lies for all of us. He must be put out of the way. If he isn't, we'd better all pull out of here, and the sooner the better."

He had arisen; and Curly following his example, they strolled away toward the bunk-houses, leaving Placer Jim to cogitate on what he had heard.

CHAPTER XIII.

KING OF THE ROUND-UP.

MADGE FARRINGTON almost cried from vexation and nervousness, as she gave the reins of her pony into the hands of a cowboy and took her way toward the house, on the evening of the memorable quarrel between Jeremiah and Gaston.

"I wouldn't have thought it of him!" was her petulant soliloquy. "I thought he would have more respect for my wishes and commands."

Then, being a woman, she ascended to her room, threw herself into a chair, and enjoyed a good cry.

"It would serve them right to send them both away!" she exclaimed, looking up and drying her eyes on a dainty bit of linen and lace which she called a handkerchief. "They deserve nothing better."

He did look crushed, though, when I spoke so sharply," smiling through the traces of tears which still glistened on her dark lashes. "I've no doubt he was terribly provoked. Captain Gaston can provoke a saint, when he tries. I am well aware of that, for he has provoked me almost beyond endurance, more than once."

She laughed a hysterical little laugh, and glanced at her reflection in the long mirror hanging against the opposite wall.

"No doubt I looked like a fright, when I rode down on them that way, with my hair flying and my face aflame. Well, I don't care; they shouldn't have tried me so, knowing, as they do, that I've got such a temper!"

With this philosophical reflection, she went in search of Pearl; and spent an hour with her in discussing the event in all its phases.

Seeing Jeremiah, the next day, she was pained by the sober and even serious look which rested on his face, usually so pleasant in its expression. The pain was not lessened by observing that he

carefully avoided her, remaining closely with the cowboys, a thing not usual with him.

She said nothing of this to any one, although she thought of it a great deal, and was much more troubled about it than she would have been willing to confess.

A few days later she called Frank into the little parlor where she was in the habit of giving audience to any one who desired to see her on matters of business or otherwise.

"The round-up begins next week, I believe?" she questioned, when he had tumbled carelessly into one of the upholstered chairs.

"Yes!" and Frank nodded.

"We'll have to send our men out under a foreman, of course, to join the men from the other ranches. We'll need a good man, and a reliable one; one who will look carefully after the cattle after they have been cut out from the general bunch, and see that the calves of the Double Dagger are not gobbled as mavericks by the other ranches."

Again Frank nodded, but in a more interested manner.

"As this ranch hasn't anything more reliable than a 'forelady,' and as a 'forelady' can't very well be expected to take the field in that way, I'll have to select some one for the work; and that's why I called you in."

Frank nodded again, and in a manner still more interested.

"I thought you might help me with your suggestions, for I'm free to say I don't know what to do."

"Appoint Jeremiah!" said Frank, with blunt directness.

"I don't like to take the responsibility of appointing any one. I've been thinking of leaving the whole thing to the cowboys, themselves. No doubt they would make a good selection?"

The last sentence was a query; and Frank looked at her keenly before replying.

"I think they would. In fact, I haven't any doubt of it. If left to a vote of the cowboys it would be a close race between Jeremiah and Placer Jim, and either would be perfectly reliable."

"Then, I'll do it!" and she dismissed him with a smile.

"Jeremiah and Placer Jim!" she muttered, when he had departed. "Well, Placer Jim will be certain to throw his influence to Jeremiah!"

The next evening, when the cowboys were gathered in the largest bunk-room, laughing and talking, the day's work being done and supper over, she astonished them somewhat by walking into their midst and calling for order.

"Order it is!" said Placer, rising and bowing. "I'll punch the head of the fust galoot w'ot begins a racket."

"All are here, I presume?" flushing as her gaze wandered over the apartment.

All were not there, but the delinquents were speedily gathered.

"The general round-up for this region begins on Monday of next week. On that day we will start what cattle we have been holding here, to the railway for shipment; and, as all our other cattle are out of the range, it will be necessary to send a good force to the round-up. The work is to be laid out and organized at the Diamond Ranch, on Blue Run; though most of the preliminaries have been already attended to, as you must have noticed, if you have seen any recent number of the *Stock Journal*."

"When our cattle have all been collected, they are to be brought here for the branding of the increase, and for the cutting out of such as are in marketable condition. The supervision of the work should be in the hands of a man who will attend promptly to everything; and who, understanding his duties, will carry them out faithfully, and without the need of supervision. He should, also, be a man who can command your respect, and secure obedience to his orders without the necessity of resorting to anything savoring to harsh measures."

"With a special view to the last, I have decided to permit you to choose your own foreman for the trip, believing that you will recognize the qualities I have mentioned as quickly as I should myself."

A cheer greeted the announcement; and, when she sat down, there was much loud whispering and a general bustle of confusion.

"The boys," said Placer, undoubling his tall form, "has ast me to inkwire how they're to do the choosin'?"

"By ballot, I suppose. That would seem to be the fairest way for all concerned. I have prepared a sufficient number of plain slips of white paper. Please distribute them, Placer, and see that each man has one. Here are some pencils, also. Pass them around."

"Each man will write on his ballot the name of the one he wishes for foreman. Then the ballots will be collected and counted by a committee."

Before she had finished, Placer had taken the papers and was distributing them, together with the pencils, amid a noisy uproar of calls, whisperings and shuffling of feet.

Jeremiah was in the room, as she knew, having seen him when she entered; but she did not deign to turn her eyes in his direction, fearing a look might disclose the game she was playing.

"Will Mr. Strothers and Mr. June be so kind as to act as tellers?" she asked, turning toward the cowboys named.

Strothers and June stated they would be only too pleased to obey her commands. Whereupon a couple of big, white hats were handed to them, and all things being in readiness, they began to collect the ballots, with much alacrity and many pleasing comments as the twisted bits of paper began to rain in the hats.

Then, as they sat down to decipher the cramped and half-illegible chirography, and score the names, as the latter were called off, on the big sheet of foolscap which Miss Farrington had given them, a silence that was almost painful settled over the expectant little group.

"The score is as follows," said Strothers, rising and giving a premonitory cough. "They was one ballot blank, an' one ballot w'ich we couldn't make head ner tail out of. Barrin' them, the score is as follows:

"Jeremire Jackson, nine votes; Cap'n Phillip Gaston, six votes; Jeems Magnus, otherwise Placer Jim, two votes."

He sat down amid a roar of applause that shook the building, and to which the stentorian voice and ponderous heels of Placer Jim added not a little.

Before it had ended, Madge was out of the room, and hurrying, with face uncomfortably warm despite the coolness of the evening air, toward the shelter and seclusion of her own room.

"Speech! Speech!" Placer howled, when the roar had somewhat subsided, feeling that the occasion demanded something in that line, if any occasion ever did. And the entire circle of cowboys taking up the cry, in true American style, Jeremiah reluctantly got upon his legs.

As he did so his eyes encountered Gaston's, which held in their evil depths a scowl that was devilish in its fiendish ferocity.

"I can only thank you for the honor you have so unexpectedly conferred on me, and assure you that my earnest endeavor will be to show that your confidence has not been misplaced."

He sat down, with these few words, and Placer and his cronies again endangered the floor with their heels, and imperiled their lungs with their vociferous shoutings; while Gaston and Curly, hot with wrath, abruptly quitted the room.

CHAPTER XIV.

MYSTERIOUS MOVEMENTS.

As foreman of the Double Dagger contingent, in the round-up that was to be, certain necessary arrangements and duties devolved upon Jeremiah, and these he attempted to look after the next day. At almost every turn he met the ill-concealed contempt and hatred of Gaston's tools; but he opposed their treacherous enmity only with open smiling, and mapped out the work without apparently heeding their mutinous spirit.

The last foreman had occupied a little room, set apart from the general bunk-rooms. Jeremiah, as his temporary successor, hesitated about following his example, thinking it savor'd of pretended superiority, and that it might be better to mingle more freely with the men, inasmuch as he had so long been one of them.

Placer Jim opposed this strongly.

"Twon't never do!" he declared. "If ye'r goin' to be foreman, even for a little time, be foreman. Them's my sentiments! The boys will think a heap sight more of ye. I've seed it tried; an' the fellers that was too blame common an' familer with the'r men, ginerly got in to trouble with the same chaps they was so powerful frienly with. Men don't expect an' don't want the'r bosses to be jist the same as they air. They want to look up to them; an' if they can't look up to them, it allus ends in the'r lookin' down on them."

"Kerry yerself straight, give yer orders as if you expected them to be obeyed, let the boys see that you understand yer bizness, an' you won't have no trouble. But if you sleep with 'em, an' 'sociate with 'em jist in the same old

way, there'll be a mutinous ruction long 'fore the round-up's over."

Jeremiah had had much experience with men, and knew that the big giant spoke the truth. The general can be as friendly as he pleases with the private in the ranks, but he must not doff his dignity or the private will secretly scorn him and condemn his actions.

The slights of Gaston's adherents pressed home the truth of this observation; and, accepting Placer's advice, Jeremiah took possession of the foreman's room, and resolved to be king of the round-up in truth as well as in name.

This action led to results which came near being fatal.

Gaston and Curly believed that Miss Farrington, in instituting the selection of a round-up foreman by ballot, had worked out a plot in favor of Jeremiah; a plot, too, which had been well understood and perhaps planned by the latter. And the belief did not tend to equanimity or easiness of mind.

By it they were more than ever convinced of the necessity of ridding the world of a person so obnoxious; and accordingly began to cast about for some plan which would enable them to carry out their purpose without special peril to their own precious necks.

The occupation of this room by Jeremiah gave them the coveted opportunity.

Placer Jim, waking very early on the following morning, thrust his nose into the air and began to sniff like a pointer dog when the scent of game floats to his nostrils.

He occupied a bunk in the room nearest the house where the new foreman was sleeping; only a thin, board partition, in fact, separating the apartments.

"Dog my cats! That's cur'us!" and again he waved his protuberant nose in the air.

"Never smelt nothin' like that afore. 'Tain't likker, nor 'tain't a fire. More like's if a drug store had bu'sted an' was a-runnin' to waste."

Then, another wave of the big proboscis.

"I do believe hit's the identical stuff w'ot Stumpy Jack was give when his leg was took off by them city sawbones. Where it's a-comin' frum, though, gits me. Hain't nobody hyer needin' any truck like that!"

He was out of his bunk and donning his clothing even while speaking.

When dressed, he slipped to the door, determined to investigate the cause of the mysterious odor; but on emerging into the open air it was no longer observable.

A slight movement in the room of the foreman, however, caught his quick ear, and advancing cautiously to the wall, he bent forward in a listening attitude.

As he did so, the door of the room was softly opened, and two men came out, bearing a heavy burden. The burden resembled some object tied up in a large gunny sack; and the bearers walked as quietly as if treading on eggs.

As they had emerged from Jeremiah's room, Placer's first impulse was to open fire on them. This was followed by a desire to witness what they intended to do with the article stolen, for he thought them members of the road-agent band who had been raiding the jolly cowboy's new apartment.

A hasty glance into the room and at the bunk convinced him that Jeremiah was sleeping the slumber of the tired and weary, if not of the just; and, keeping well to the rear, he crept forward in the wake of the supposed thieves, chuckling quietly as he imagined Jeremiah's anger and chagrin when the latter should discover that he had been robbed so neatly.

"Must ha' stole his trunk, an' it loaded with gol' dollars!" he observed, as the men placed the burden on the ground and halted for a moment's rest. "They can't be goin' fur, if the things already gittin' too heavy fer 'em. I'd give a good 'eal, now, to git a squint at their faces, an' find out who they air. I'll bet a hoss 'at one on 'em's Curly."

Again the figures, rendered ill-defined by the darkness, moved forward, carrying the bag and its contents between them; and again Placer Jim crept like a shadow in their wake.

They were moving in the direction of the store, and when they reached it they again stopped and placed the load on the ground.

A sign-post, with a pair of broad arms, announcing that the place was a general store and post-office, stood by the wooden awning; and to the top of this one of the men climbed with the agility of a monkey.

If the big giant had not been unusually stupid that morning he would have guessed the truth long before, but he had so completely imbibed the idea that the men were engaged in robbery, he never looked further for the cause of their

mysterious movements. Now, however, he began to have an inkling of what was really passing before him.

He rubbed his eyes with a big, bony fist, to assure himself that he saw correctly, when the man slid down from the post, leaving something strangely resembling a rope dangling from one of the arms.

"Bu'st me!" he whispered. "They—they ain't shorely goin' to hang the thing up there! Must be somethin' more'n a trunk, then in that 'tarnal big coffee-sack! B' ginger, hit mus' be a man!"

His big revolver came out, swiftly but noiselessly; and as a noose had now been fastened about one end of the bag, and the scoundrels were beginning to heave on the rope, he gave a terrific shout and bounded forward, firing as he ran.

The effect was electrical. The rope was dropped instantly, the two men taking to their heels, disappeared around the building, and were swallowed up in the gloom. As they vanished one of them fell heavily, but was up again; and Placer, running forward, could hear the fellow's eloquent profanity, as he scrambled after his comrade.

On bending over the bag to sever the rope, the odor that had attracted his attention in the bunk-room again assailed his nostrils.

"Chlur'form!" he gasped, spreading open the mouth of the bag.

Then, looking down at the face so dimly revealed, he started back with a cry of amazement:

"Hit's Jeremiah!"

He was down on his knees, tearing away the imprisoning bag. Plucking open the shirt of the apparently dead man, he began to chafe the arms and body.

"I mus' git 'im to the house!" he cried, feverish with fear. "I'm 'most afeard he's done fer. Cuss the villains! I think I know 'em; an' I'll git even with 'em fer this, if I hang fer it!"

The shout and the shots had aroused the ranch, and the cowboys were now tumbling from the bunk-rooms, and calling anxiously to each other, while lights were seen to gleam from the windows of the house.

"This way!" roared Placer, making a speaking-trumpet of his hands, and directing it toward the excited cowboys. "This way; I'm needin' help, powerful!"

As he did so, he turned to see Philip Gaston at his elbow.

"What's up?" inquired Gaston. "I tumbled out ahead of Frank, and came here as quick as my legs could carry me. I presume Frank's awake by this time, and will be along directly."

"Up!" sneered Placer. "I shu'dn't reely think you'd need to ast, sein' that you know already."

"What do you mean?" and the Irishman recoiled a step.

"That you're a sneakin', murderin' villain!" the giant returned in a low tone. "No use tryin' to make me think you didn't have a hand in this; and if he's dead—mind me, if he's dead—I'll have yer heart's blood fer it, if I haf to hunt ye to the ends o' the earth."

The manner and words were of such deadly portent that Gaston was for the moment rendered speechless, and before he could recover the use of his tongue, the cowboys were at hand.

Among them limped Curly, growling loudly that he had twisted his ankle in getting out of the saddle the previous evening, and could hardly walk because of it.

"It'll be yer neck next time, I sincerely hopes!" Placer muttered under his breath, as he began to answer the queries poured on him.

"Help me tote him into the house!" he commanded, rather sternly. "Some men 'u'd talk all night. I'll tell ye all I know about it, after awhile. He may die while we're foolin' away time hyer, chinnin'."

Thus ordered, willing hands helped to assist the unconscious foreman into the house, where Madge had sent word he was to be conveyed.

CHAPTER XV.

COOL CAPTAIN GASTON.

"BRING him right in here!" commanded Madge, who, with Pearl, was in a flutter of excited fear. "Place him on the bed there. It's chloroform, you say? Then get some water; quick!"

The instructions were hastily obeyed; and efforts at once commenced for reviving the man from his death-like state.

While these were in progress, the cowboy who had brought the gunny sack to the house, chancing to glance again at it, noticed a piece of paper sticking to it. The paper was fastened with a

pin; and as he bent over it curiously he was horrified at the words written thereon.

"See hyer, fellers," he cried. "What does this mean?"

Those not immediately engaged in the efforts at restoration, Gaston being of the number, gathered about the questioner, who pointed, openmouthed, at the bit of writing:

"The work of the road-agents. Let all traitors to our cause beware!"

The gazers stared at each other, in a bewildered way, as they read the ominous words.

"The work of the road-agents!" said one. "Traitors! Causel!"

"He must be one of them," and Gaston's insinuating voice took up the subject. "It can't mean anything else. And they've intended to put him out of the way, thinking he meant to betray them. This looks bad, boys; better keep shady about it, though, till you know for certain. Well! Well! Who would have thought it?"

"I think I'll take charge of that bit of writin'," and a cowboy who was known to be friendly to Jeremiah unpinned the slip and coolly thrust it into his pocket. "I wouldn't ha' thought it, neither!"

The words were accompanied by a glance at Gaston, which the latter did not at all like.

He was about to reply, when gratified murmurs from the other side of the room indicated that the foreman was returning to consciousness, and checked his words.

"Whoop! He's wuth twenty dead men yit!" shouted Placer, proceeding to execute a hornpipe, in the delirium of his delight.

"Wuss'n the seven sleepers, though, to wake up!" as he again looked at the form on the bed.

Jeremiah was muttering incoherently and staring about, evidently not quite comprehending his position.

"Comin' round, eh?" the big giant questioned, with a beaming smile. "That's right! Don't worrit yerself, though. Take yer time fer it. Time's wuth money now, if't ever is. Time, an' warter!"

"Where am I?" said Jeremiah, half-rising and endeavoring to climb out of the bed. "Somebody must have hit me. My head spins like a top."

"I'll hit ye, if ye don't lay there till you git acquainted with yerself ag'in!" and Placer, with words so rude, restrained him with a touch as gentle as a woman's.

Now that the worst was over, most of the cowboys wended their way back to the bunk-houses, discussing the mysterious affair in all its phases; and an hour later, just as dawn was beginning to streak the east, Placer Jim assisted Jeremiah to return to his own room.

He did not leave the place until sure his pard needed no further attention. Then he was angered at seeing Philip Gaston advancing as if to call on the recovered foreman.

"Ye needn't go in there!" and Placer's words were big with hatred and contempt. "'Cause why, I'm looking after him jist now; an', as his nuss, ferbid it!"

"Oh, you do? And if I should say, I'll go anyhow?"

"Why, ye wouldn't never git through the door, that's all."

Gaston sneered, but showed his good sense by stopping where he was.

"There hain't any sort o' use o' you an' me shilly-shallyin' about, Gaston! I understan' you purty well; an' if you hain't acquain'd with me, I'll purceed to give ye an interduction. You was one o' the skunks w'ot done that dirty bizness las' night, an' I hain't a mite afeared to say so."

"If you have any call to go in there, tell me w'ot it is, an' I'll go wi' ye. Otherwise ye stay out."

"Cool as ice in August!" and again that supercilious sneer disfigured his countenance. "I'll have to ask you what you mean, I suppose."

"Shouldn't think you'd need, after w'ot I said to you this mornin', to say nothing of jist now!"

"You mean to charge that I tried to murder Mr. Jackson?"

"That's w'ot I'd call it. Mebbe you've got soft words w'ot'd sound better an' mean the same thing. If you have, you kin use 'em. I call it murder."

Gaston laughed in a low, harsh way.

"I thought, from what was contained on the slip, that it was the work of road-agents!"

"K'rect! I agrees wi' ye, there! 'Twas road-agents; an' which their names is Gaston an' Curly. That cussid chlur'form waked me up, an' I follered clean frum hyer to the post over

there, an' would ha' put some chunks of lead into both o' ye, if 't'd a' been a little lighter."

"What an ingenious fellow you are, my dear Placer. You astonish me, really. You ought to go into the detective business."

The big giant breathed very hard at this sally; and, with an angry scowl, dropped his hand to the revolver flapping against his hip.

"There! There! Don't let your angry passions rise. Shooting, at human targets, is tabooed on this ranch, you know."

Then, as the scowl passed:

"You do me too much credit! It isn't hardly fair, Placer, to lay all the devilment that's done in this neck of the woods, at the door of yours truly. Even the devil isn't as black as he's painted."

"Some on 'em's a good deal blacker, 'cordin' to my count. An I said, 'tain't no use you an' me shilly-shallyin'. You had a hand in that bizness, an' I know it. An' knowin' which, I tell ye not to go into that door."

"I should think you'd be afraid I might chloroform you, where you stand, Placer; you think so highly of my accomplishments. It's as you say, though, since you have appointed yourself Mr. Jackson's especial guardian and champion. I merely intended to make a friendly call, and congratulate him on his narrow escape. But another time will do, as well. Ta ta, my dear Placer!"

And he strolled leisurely away, leaving the giant grinding his teeth in rage.

CHAPTER XVI.

WEAVING A NET.

JOLLY JEREMIAH, when he had fully recovered from the effects of the choking received and the chloroform administered, had a quiet little talk with Placer, in the seclusion of the foreman's room.

"We'll have to move against the enemy, Placer. He's getting over bold. I didn't really think he would attempt anything so murderous, even after what you heard the other night. But, in spite of his pretended coolness, he's badly frightened, and his fear is making him desperate."

"You know the men on the different ranches whom it will do to trust?"

Placer nodded assent.

"Have them meet us in the dry gully, five miles north of here, on Thursday night, will you? I don't care for a large number. The main point is to get such as you can fully trust; and to do that it will be well to avoid any who are on terms of special friendship with the members of the road-agent band."

He looked at the other questioningly.

"I kin do it, I think," Placer replied, interpreting the look.

"Unless you know that a man is all right, don't say a word to him. We can't afford to take any risks. Now, you can go; and say to the boys that I've sent you to make some arrangements for the round-up."

With these injunctions fixed in his mind, Placer Jim repaired to the horse corral, selected a pony, and was soon on his way. The ranches were widely scattered; but the pony was a tough little beast and stood up to the work so well that the ranches were all visited in due time, and on the afternoon of the day fixed for the meeting, Placer was again at home.

He was in an especial good humor, for the work had been accomplished in a manner to completely satisfy him. He had a number of acquaintances at the different ranches, and these, and these only, had he approached. They were honorable fellows, all of them, and hated the band that was bringing disgrace on the section quite as much as Placer did himself. Hence, when the big giant explained the nature of his errand, and told what had been revealed to him by the dying cowboy, Sandy, they agreed to meet him and the Double Dagger foreman on the night and at the place appointed.

"They'll be there, twenty on 'em, and men 'at ye kin tie to!" was his confidential and confident assertion. "I've worked, in my time, alongside of ever' one of 'em. They're fellers 'at kin ride an' shoot, too, an' wouldn't be a mite skeery, if't should come to a stan' up fight."

Jeremiah repaid him with a complimentary look and a silent pressure of the hand.

The night was a moonless one, and promised to be cloudy and dark, as the two, with four trusty followers, rode northward toward the gully. They had left the ranch one at a time, and secretly, for fear of attracting the attention of some of Gaston's satellites, and thus endangering the success of the enterprise. But, once out on the trackless prairie with their destination unknown, they had little fear that they could

be successfully followed even were their absence noted.

"The only trouble," and Jeremiah smiled, "is that Gaston, with his slick tongue might succeed in making some believe that we constitute the road-agent band, and have slipped out on a raiding expedition. He's quite equal to the successful performance of the task."

Placer Jim and the others agreed with him, with earnest asseverations; and again they rode on at a swinging gallop, the hoofs of the ponies sinking into the moss-like buffalo-grass sod and making very little noise.

At this rate, it did not take long to reach the dry gully, which, notwithstanding its shining, sandy bottom, was sometimes the conduit of a mighty flood.

There they found a half-dozen cowboys already congregated, who had ridden in from the nearest ranch; and, as the night wore on, the full complement of twenty, gathered.

As they came in, in groups of twos and threes, they were met and welcomed by Placer and Jeremiah, and introduced to such as they were not already acquainted with, the latter being a very inconsequential number.

On being informed that all were there who had been notified, Jeremiah arose and introduced the subject uppermost on every mind; and, after relating the facts already detailed to them by Placer, spoke of the object of the meeting.

"It is a matter in which our honor as cowboys and upright citizens is at stake. It is such men as these who have brought the word cowboy into undeserved repute for evil, and caused the people of the East, who know nothing about us, to regard us a set of unhung villains whose only delight is outrage and murder."

"It becomes us, therefore, to purify our ranks of these men who are bringing odium on our good name; and the only way to do that is to stamp this organization out, root and branch, by the iron heel of the law. I would be a poor adviser, if I should urge the use of any instruments except such as the laws of the land place in our hands. They are adequate for every purpose, if we will only make a right use of them."

"What I have to advise, then, is this: The men who are members of this organization are well known to us through the confession of Sandy, made to our friend and pard, Placer Jim, a man whom we know to be truthful and reliable. We have the names of these men; and know where to place our hands on them, at any moment."

"Hence, I propose that on Saturday night of this week, these men be seized, and conveyed to the jail at Plains City, under a guard sufficiently strong for the purpose, and there legally charged with the offense they have committed."

"If the seizures are made suddenly, there will be little difficulty in taking them all; and, if the fear-stricken are made to understand that the entire band has been betrayed and arrested, some of them will doubtless break down and make such confessions as will result in the conviction of all."

His words were greeted with murmurs of approval; and, seeing their minds were in accord with his, he went on, elaborating and explaining the plans he had previously thought out.

"To accomplish this result it will be necessary for the men representing any particular ranch to call to their assistance such of their comrades as they can rely on, together with the proprietor and foreman if deemed best; and then in a body and under one leader arrest such members of the road-agent band as may be on that particular ranch."

"If proper precautions are taken, every member of the band can be in custody within thirty minutes after the hour agreed upon for the commencement of the work. Thus no alarm can be spread, and none of them can escape."

"Now, if our mutual friend, Placer, will call out the names of the men, grouping them together in ranches, I shall be much obliged."

Thus commanded, Placer Jim called off the names of those present; and, after a little talk to each group, Jeremiah placed the hour for the arrests at ten o'clock on the coming Saturday night, and enjoined the members of each group to caution and promptness.

It was long after the hour of midnight, when the conference ended, and the men filed silently out into the darkness and disappeared in the direction of their homes.

Jeremiah was much elated over the success of this preliminary work, and confidently predicted that the road-agent band would receive its death-blow at the hour agreed on for the arrests.

"If these men are all trusty—and I'm convinced they are—those fellows can't escape us."

I tell you, Placer, we've got the clinch on them!"

"There'll be a powerful sight o' kickin', too, when we go to tighten it!" and the giant laughed at the thought engendered by the comparison. "Buckin' bronchos won't be nowhere!"

"And we'll hope there will be some squealing, as well as kicking. If we can only scare two or three into giving the whole thing away, it will save us much trouble; for I needn't remind you that, otherwise, the entire proof lies on you. You're the only one who has ever heard anything."

"Other people might, if they didn't lay in bed so 'tarnal late of mornin'!" the giant retorted, with a good-humored chuckle.

Thus, on their homeward journey, they built roseate castles; only to have the same tumble in ruins about their ears the next day.

Early on the morrow, Captain Philip Gaston announced his intention of going to Denver, stating he would not return until the morning of the day of the round-up.

"Curse the luck!" Jeremiah fumed, when he learned it. "Can it be he has heard something? If I was sure he had, I'd arrest him this instant."

Placer Jim, while equally chagrined, was certain Gaston had heard nothing of the contemplated arrests.

"He can't have!" was his conclusive argument.

"He or some of his tools may have dogged us last night!" asserted Jeremiah. "If they did, they'll all get away."

The uncertainty was too great, however, for him to venture on the arrest of the gallant captain; and the latter left the place on the first stage.

This action necessitated the partial undoing of the work of the previous night; for, should the other arrests be made, Gaston would take the alarm, and thus the principal fish break through the meshes of the net.

So, Placer Jim was compelled to repeat his visits to the ranches; and matters were forced to remain in abeyance until Gaston should return.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE GREAT ROUND-UP.

GASTON returned that Monday morning as he had said he would, and Jolly Jeremiah drew a long breath of relief in consequence.

The plans so carefully laid could not, apparently, be put into execution until after the great round-up; and Jeremiah, with the cowboys of the Double Dagger—Captain Gaston among the number—repaired to the appointed place to meet the forces from the other ranches.

Territory had been previously assigned to each force; and, after some consultation, the work was begun.

Jeremiah's party was to beat a portion of country more than a hundred miles in extent, and lying between two creeks, known respectively as Mud Run and "Little Injun," and drive all the cattle found in that belt to a certain point, to which the other cattle would also be driven, and where they would be separated according to their respective brands.

The task occupied more than two weeks of time; for every valley in the entire extent had to be visited. It was accomplished in due course, however; and, with the big herd thus gathered, he started for the rendezvous.

Gaston had been very quiet and undemonstrative throughout the trip, to the foreman's no inconsiderable surprise. He had expected trouble from him, and perhaps treachery, and had watched him as the wary chicken watches the circling hawk.

It may be that this constant surveillance prevented the Irishman from putting any schemes into effect, always provided he had any schemes primed for the purpose. Be that as it may, he was as docile and tractable as the most inoffensive cowboy there, rarely speaking to Curly or any of the latter's pals, and seemingly intent only on serving the man who had been placed in command over him.

His manners ought to have been reassuring to the foreman, but they were not; and the latter, without being able to explain why, felt as if constantly walking above a slumbering volcano.

The rendezvous was reached, after a long and toilsome drive. Many of the other parties had arrived with their respective bunches of cattle, and the others got in within a few days.

Then the work of "cutting out," or separating, was commenced. This occupied another week; at the end of which, all things being in readiness, and the herd of the Double Dagger bunched,

Jeremiah and his little force started for the home ranch.

The cattle being jaded from the long drives and the chasing they had been subjected to in the "cutting out" process, very slow progress was made; and another week had almost vanished into the past, before the outer limits of their own range was reached.

Here, one dark and gusty night, fell the long-expected blow.

Because of the ugly weather a "dry" camp had been made. It was ten miles to the next watering place; which, by getting an early start, they expected to reach by the middle of the following forenoon.

As the cattle had been watered about six or eight hours before, no trouble was anticipated from this early going into camp. They were, however, rendered very restless by the unfavorable atmospheric conditions, and many hours elapsed before they would lie down. In consequence, a strong guard was thrown about them, under the leadership of Placer Jim.

It was cold, disagreeable and monotonous work for Placer and his men, but they performed it without a murmur, for a cowboy does not expect to be swung through life on downy pillows.

While Placer was thus riding slowly about the herd, droning out a song to soothe the restless animals—or rather shouting it, for shouting was necessary to make his voice heard above the roar of the wind—the herd was struck with a sudden commotion.

The experienced cowboy saw that a stampede was imminent. The other cowboys were stationed at various places about the big bunch. Knowing he could not make these hear, he rode quickly up and down his beat, singing and calling in a vain endeavor to quiet the scared brutes. It was so dark he could not see what the trouble was.

"If we was in an Injun country, I should say they was bein' stampeded by the 'tarnal redskins," he muttered. "Mus' be buffer wolves got amongst 'em, fer there hain't no Injuns about hyer!"

His efforts were wholly ineffectual. The strange commotion increased, and within a few moments from its commencement the entire herd was rushing away toward the south, the tread of their hoofs resembling the roar of a cyclone.

Jeremiah dashed up to Placer's side at almost the same instant.

"What started them?" he shouted.

"Don't know!" the cowboy bellowed.

Then he jabbed the spurs mercilessly against his pony's flanks, and was away like a shot in their wake.

It was a wild, reckless, perilous chase. The maddened animals streamed on like a rushing tornado, and at their sides and behind them rode the cowboys, striving to obtain sufficient control over them to make them "mill," or bunch and run in a circle until they had worn out their fright.

In the darkness and amid the excitement it was impossible to tell that Gaston and Curly and their allies were not with the party.

"I'm afraid they'll run till they kill themselves!" Jeremiah shouted, as his pathway chanced to cross Placer's.

"Can't help it if they do!" bellowed the giant. "Hain't seed Curly or Gaston, have ye? Them fellers is sogerin', I do b'lieve! Can't run acrost 'em nowhere!"

The question brought unpleasant suggestions to the foreman's mind. Why should these men wish to "soldier?" as Placer had expressed it. And at such a time above all others?

Two answers suggested to the questions: They hoped the herd would escape, and the disgrace of it be thrown on Jeremiah's shoulders. Or they had been the prime cause of the stampede, and expected to make an attack and slay the foreman amid the confusion.

Either theory was sufficiently disagreeable, and after giving the matter much anxious thought, he again sought Placer Jim.

It was difficult to talk intelligibly, but as they raced forward side by side, he managed to communicate his fears to the giant.

"I'll speak to the boys," said Placer, "an' if anything o' the kind should be in the wind, we'll be ready fer it."

After that the cowboys kept closer together. They did not cease their efforts to control the cattle, however; and in the gray of the early morning, when near the notorious Cheyenne Rock, they began to think they would at last accomplish their purpose, for the cattle were rapidly reaching the point of exhaustion, and fatigue is a great conqueror.

Then, out of the semi-darkness, seeming to

come from the somber shadows of the gorge, rushed a band of masked men, and as they came, they threw the cattle again into confusion by their yells and shots.

They had evidently expected to find the cowboys wholly unprepared, and thus secure an easy victory, but they were woefully mistaken.

"Let the critters go!" yelled Placer, reining in, an example which Jeremiah and the cowboys imitated. "We've got wuss'n a stampede on our han's, er I'm mightily mistaken."

The charging and yelling road-agents were almost on them, now; and the cowboys, wrought to a pitch of frenzy by the loss of the cattle, were nothing loth for the impending fight.

It is not my intention to describe the combat in detail. It was a short and bloody one. One of the cowboys was killed, and three or four were injured more or less severely. The road-agents suffered even more. Of the six composing the force, two were slain and the others so badly wounded that only one escaped.

When the masks were removed from the faces of the captured men, one of them was found to be Captain Philip Gaston, and another, the villainous Curly.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A RASCAL EXPOSED.

GASTON, rendered reckless and desperate by defeat and exposure, railed on his captors in the most bitter terms. All the animosity of his vindictive nature seemed suddenly aroused, and the stream of defiant abuse and profanity which poured from his lips revealed the innate depravity of his heart in all its hideous ugliness. He had given free rein to the worst passions of his soul, and they had utterly wrecked and destroyed every good thought and aspiration.

Such of the cowboys as had passed through the fight uninjured were sent on after the frightened cattle, while the others, with Jeremiah and Placer, formed an escort for the captured men, and conducted them to the ranch.

Here Gaston's bitter railery again broke forth; and on the head of the tender-hearted girl who had believed in him, and whom he had so basely and cruelly deceived, he poured the vials of his fiercest wrath—so lost was he to all sense of honor or shame.

Fearing the members of the road-agent band who were stationed at other ranches might hear of the defeat and arrest of their leader, Jeremiah gathered what force he could and set out to compass their capture. In this he was so successful that all but three of the scoundrels were in the toils before the end of the week.

Then came the revelation of the fact, which the observant reader has doubtless long since guessed, that Jolly Jeremiah was not all he had seemed. That, in fact, he was none other than "Warbling William," the famous detective, and that he had sought employment on the Double Dagger for the sole purpose of exposing and breaking up the band of scoundrels who had so long made that section their headquarters.

He had been sent there by the United States Secret Service Bureau, and how well he accomplished his mission this story has essayed to tell.

However, something more had come of his visit to the Double Dagger than the mere weeding out of a despicable band of rascals.

"There is a destiny that shapes our ends,
Rough hew them as we may."

and that destiny had led him to the feet of a woman who combined such charms of mind and person that he had unconsciously, almost, become her willing worshiper and pliant slave.

That woman was Madge Farrington, the ranch queen.

Now that his innocence had been established, and his honor and integrity made clear as day, he felt free to approach her on the subject that constantly lay uppermost in his heart; and this he did on his return from Plains City, where the prisoners had been conveyed.

Her manner had for some time convinced him that Madge held for him a feeling warmer and stronger than that of mere friendship; yet, when the time came to test this, he found himself almost as helpless and wordless as when he had first seen her.

"I—I must speak, Miss Farrington," he exclaimed, after talking in an aimless way, on every imaginable subject, for a full half-hour. "I shall never know rest nor peace, if I do not, Madge, dearest, you must have guessed my secret, long ago. My looks, my actions, have told you! I love you more than you can ever realize or know; more than life itself!"

He seized her hand, which was feverishly

warm; and, when she did not resist, drew her to his breast in a fond embrace.

"Speak!" he whispered. "Tell me that I have not loved in vain."

She turned her starry eyes toward him, in a reassuring way; and, on her red, ripe lips, he placed love's first, pure kiss.

This bright picture, full of joy and hope, had its contratype. In the gloomy prison at Plains City, awaiting trial for the high crimes of robbery and murder, were Gaston and Curly, and the other members of the road-agent band.

The momentous day arrived at last; and Jolly Jeremiah—or William Ware, to give him his true name—succeeded, with the host of witnesses he had gathered, in proving the guilt of every member of the gang. More than that: it was shown that Philip Gaston had never been a captain in the army, but had been a private in the ranks, and had ignominiously deserted his post in time of danger—and that the stain of desertion had never been removed from his name.

Pearl, who at one time had imagined herself in love with the scoundrel, had been so overwhelmed by the revelations of his deceit and treachery, and by the coarse railery he had heaped on her innocent head, that her kindly feelings for him had changed to loathing and disgust. And when, with his subordinates, he was convicted of the crimes charged against him, and sentenced to a long term of imprisonment, she received the news with remarkable firmness and equanimity, realizing that her life had escaped the imminent peril of shipwreck.

Two years later she met and married a man every way worthy of her; and has since lived a life remarkable for its quiet and happy contentment.

The nuptials of Jeremiah and Madge were not so long delayed.

The great trial, with its attendant excitement and worry, had scarcely ended, when the news went abroad over the vast extent of surrounding plains that the successful detective and the beautiful ranch queen were to be united in marriage. And when the twinkling lights in the big ranch-house, on the eventful evening, announced that all was in readiness, they drew to the place the ranchmen and the cowboys of the entire region.

That was a wedding long to be remembered. There was music, there was dancing, there was gayety; and, when the hours grew late, a feast to touch a cowboy's heart was spread in the long dining-hall.

There was no happier man present, with the possible exception of the bridegroom, than the brawny giant, Placer Jim. How he roared and "haw-hawed," how he cracked time-worn jokes at the expense of himself and every one else, how he laughed and cried by turns, surpasses the author's powers of telling!

And, now, with a further word, we must leave them.

The detective, abandoning his old-time calling, assumed sole charge of the great and powerful Double Dagger Ranch. Frank became his partner in course of time; and, as Placer Jim is their foreman, I know the reader will join in wishing them long lives and unending prosperity.

THE END.

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